

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

I. The flood narrative begins with the rise of the powerful Nephilim who arise as a cross between the "Sons of heaven and the "daughters of men."

A. Unfortunately, as the prior generations of Seth's line begin dying off, the "sons of God" begin intermingling with the "daughters of men," leading to the rise of the terrible Nephilim. There are two views about what this intermixing between the sons of God and daughters of heaven means.

1. The more traditional view, held by the likes of St. Augustine and St. Ephraim, holds that the members of Seth's heritage began intermarrying with members of Cain's more corrupt heritage, and in fact taking many wives "as they pleased, indicating more polygamy and ignoring God's will.

a. It was a constant theme of Israeli history that marrying pagans would lead to disaster, but they did so anyway. See, e.g., Neh. 13:23-31. Thus, for example, Solomon was led astray by foreign wives. See 1 Kings 11.

b. The problem was not international marriages, for Joseph had married two Egyptian wives, and Ruth, a Moabite, was the great-grandmother of King David. See Ruth 1:4, 4:13-17. Neither of these arrangements was condemned, and Ruth's marriage to Boaz in fact celebrated in the book named after her, because the wives became Jewish. The emphasis was that couples should share the same values. Even today, while mixed marriages are permitted, shared devotions and values are important. See Catechism 1634-35.

2. St. Clement of Alexandria, and many modern scholars, argue that the "sons of god" here means angels, or more particularly, fallen angels, for that term was sometimes use to mean angels. See, e.g., Ps. 29:1; 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6, 2:1.

- Angels cannot literally marry humans, as the Jews well understood. However, God took Israel as His bride (a symbol fulfilled in Christ taking the Church as His bride), and as Israel's infidelity to God was sometimes called adultery. See, e.g., Is. 54:1-8, 62:4-5; Hos. 2:1-3:3. St. Paul and the Book of Revelation would likewise describe

the Church as the "bride of Christ." See Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7-10, 21:2, 9-10. Using this analogy, this "marriage" of the sons of heaven to the daughters of men may mean idolatry on behalf of these "daughters of men" or, even worse, the consultation of demons by the nations. In this case, the daughters of men would presumably be the nations that descended from Seth possibly Cain's line as well.

B. In either case, the intermixing or the idolatry leads to the rise of the Nephilim, who were strong and evil figures.

1. The text describes them in what to the world seem like complimentary terms, i.e. as heroes of old and men of renown. But this seeking of human glory apart from God is evil and in fact leads to the flood. There is a dramatic contrast with the values of pagans, ancient and modern, who celebrate strength, regardless of whether it is restrained by God's law.

2. The people still either: (1) were of the line of Seth and had the strength that comes from God's blessings, but now no longer allied with Him; or (2) even worse, had spiritual power from demons.

1. The combination of power and lawlessness leads to great evils. As a result, God decides to withdraw His spirit and limit the life of man. Death and the difficulties at rising to the spiritual level are meant to reduce the amount of evil, but it continues all the same. The Anakim who inhabited the Promised Land before the Israelites arrived seem to be related, for they were a race of giants whom the spies compared to the Nephilim. See Num. 13:28, 32-33.

- Some scholars also argue that the Nephilim were demons that the connection of humans with the netherworld brought about.

2. The spirit gave the prophets and kings power from heaven. See, e.g., Num. 11:24-30, 27:18; Duet. 34:9; 1 Sam. 10:5-13, 16:13, 19:20-24; 1 Kings 22:10-12; Is. 11:2, 42:1. It appears that people of the line of Seth at least had this power early on. But now that they have abandoned God, that power can no longer be entrusted to them.

- The prophets would speak of a day when that spirit would again be poured out upon all of humanity. See, e.g., Ez. 37:1-14; Joel 3:1-2. That promise would be fulfilled at Pentecost. See Acts 2:1-28.

3 Limiting the life of man limits the evil he can do, both because a person can only live so long and because the awareness of death hopefully disciplines people's ambitions.

- The reference to the life of man being 120 years could mean that the life of person would be no more than 120 years or that God had decided to wipe out the known world 120 years after the pronouncement. In the latter case, God may have been granting a time for repentance as He would later with the city of Nineveh through the prophet Joel.

II. Because of the increasing evil, God sends the Great Flood, while saving Noah and his family.

A. In the midst of wickedness, Noah alone saves the civilization.

1. His justice is described as a combination of "walking with God" as Enoch did and "being innocent" (also translated blameless or pure.) Prayerfulness, symbolized by walking with God, and moral uprightness are ever interconnected.

- It is a reflection of the power of goodness that one good man can save a civilization. Noah apparently lived in the midst of the people, but was still just, showing the ability to avoid sin in the midst of corruption. See Heb. 11:7.

2. He has three sons, apparently at the age of 500, indicating a great deal of patience.

B Noah's virtue then leads to a two-fold test as God commands him to build the ark.

1. First, there is the colossal task of building the ark, which was three hundred cubits (about 450 feet long) about half as long as a modern ocean liner and five times as long (and five times as wide) as the Mayflower. Even if the number is mythical, one gets the sense of an enormous undertaking.

2. Second, it was not clear to everyone else why he was building this ark. The building would probably have subjected him to ridicule. The project certainly took a long time, and may have lasted for 100 years. At times, it probably seemed as though the flood would never come. God calls for courage, both in great undertakings and also in not getting worldly credit for them.

C. God also calls for Noah to save the animals by bringing pairs of them into the ark.

1. God calls for seven pairs of the clean animals and one pair of the unclean animals. Elsewhere, in verses 8-9 and 15 of chapter 7, there seems to be an implication that there is only one pair of every animal, but the notion of pairs may simply mean that all the animals were in pairs, not that there was only one pair of every animal

- It is noteworthy that the distinction between clean and unclean animals was not commanded yet. That distinction would arise only after the Exodus. One possibility is that the Jewish ritual code was based upon rites that had long predated them. Or it may be that clean and unclean had a more literal interpretation, i.e. some were physically clean and other prone to filth.

2. There is a sense of recreation here, for in the midst of a wicked world, a harmony between man and animals returns and, at least for now, within Noah's family. This harmony is a symbol of the new creation. See Is. 11:6-9, 65:17-25. As St. Paul will later say, where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. See Rom. 5:20.

3. Many theologians have seen the Ark as a symbol of the Church, rising above the death that condemns every institution on this earth and bringing the people of God to a new creation. See, e.g., St. Augustine, City of God, Book 15, ch. 6.

4. It seems from chapter 7, verse 16 that God Himself closed the Ark, indicating a miraculous conclusion to the construction; it is a symbol that our efforts begin with and are completed by the grace of God.

D. The Flood is again a symbol of nature itself rising up against man's sinfulness. The sea was a common symbol among the ancient Jews for chaos. See, e.g., Ps. 18:5, 69:2-3, 124:3-4. And if man will act in a chaotic fashion, then being overwhelmed by the chaos of the sea is a fitting punishment.

E. As the flood waters subside, Noah sends out a dove, a symbol of innocence, to find land.

1. A dove was sometimes a symbol of simplicity of hearth and a longing for help from heaven. See Matt. 10:16; Is. 38:14.
 2. In Jewish rituals, it was also offered as a sacrifice both to atone for sin and after the birth of a child. See Lev. 5:7, 12:8. Thus, the dove was among the Jews a symbol of restoration and recreation.
 3. The Holy Spirit also came to Jesus at His Baptism in the form of a dove. See Mark 1:10, John 1:32. This event gives another meaning to the symbol of a dove at the end of the flood. As the Spirit hovered over the waters at the first creation, so here the dove returns over the waters as this recreation.
 4. The rains continued for forty days, a common symbol of sanctification, taken up in Moses' two encampments of forty days on Mount Sinai, Elijah's forty day journey to Mount Horeb (another name for Mount Sinai) and Jesus' forty days in the desert. See Ex. 24:18, 34:28; 1 Kings 19:4; Matt. 4:2.
 5. The blessing of water in Baptism takes the Flood as a symbol of the cleansing of sin that occurs at baptism. See 1 Pet. 3:19-22.
- F. In total, the Flood involved three sets of seven days (one at the beginning and two at the end) and three sets of forty days (two at the beginning and one at the end) with another 150 days (the same as the number of Psalms) in between as the water crests.
- One has a sense of order and prayerfulness in the midst of the chaos around the ark.

III. After the Flood, there is, initially at least, a sense of a new creation.

- A. They leave the ark on Noah's six hundred and first birthday, the beginning of his seventh century. There is a sense of a new Sabbath and a new order.

B. After the Flood, Noah intuitively decides to offer a sacrifice. As with Cain and Abel, sacrifice seems natural to him.

C. God accepts the sacrifice and swears a covenant to Noah, although it is partially based upon the recognition of human sinfulness.

1. God begins by promising not to destroy humanity again, but interestingly precisely because there is evil in the human heart. Part of the implication is that sending a flood to get rid of everyone except the one just family will not work, because that evil (which we now call original sin) will rise again. It will require the sacrifice of the Son of God on Calvary to achieve that purpose. In addition, God may have sympathy for us because we cannot help but be sinful.

- The rainbow is a symbol of that promise of God's providence, for it reflects a beauty and order above the sinfulness of this earth. Ezekiel senses the rainbow as a sign of God's glory and splendor. There is a dramatic contrast here with the ancient god Ashur, who was portrayed with a rainbow as a weapon.

2. God allows the eating of meat, for there will be death and disorder anyway, and thus killing animals for meat does not cause any new conflict.

a. However, there is the restriction that one must not eat meat with blood in it. Part of the reason may be practical; draining (or cooking) the blood out would make it less likely that one would become ill from the meat.

b. But there is also a symbolic reason. It was common pagan practice to drink the blood of an animal (or even a human in cannibalism) to share in its nature and thus acquire some of its strength. The symbolic meaning is that a human is sharing in the animal nature, which like the intermixing that led to the Nephilim, brings a terrible strength. Thus, it was forbidden to Jews. See Lev. 17:12. The Eucharist is the opposite. By sharing in the body and blood of Christ, we join in His divine nature.

3. God also affirms the sacredness of human life. God forbids murder, for we are, despite all of our sinfulness, still in His image and likeness. Thus, God commands Noah's family to be fruitful and multiply.

- In very poetic fashion, God states that, if people are violent to others, violence will come back to them. "Whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." The Jewish law did authorize capital punishment for murderers and the notion of an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." See Ex. 21:12-14, 23-25. But here the statement of God is more one of description than command; God is warning that violence will come to those who are violent.

D. Although the account is largely stylized, the fact that other religions of the area also have flood myths would indicate that it does recount an underlying event in which a civilization (probably the known world at the time) was destroyed by a flood.

1. There is strong geological evidence of two colossal floods in the lower Mesopotamian region about 4000 B.C. and again 2800 B.C. The account in Genesis may describe one of these floods.

2. There is also geological evidence that the Black Sea rose a total of almost 200 feet around 7500 B.C. after the end of the last Ice Age, leading to its connection with the Mediterranean Sea. Some of that rise may well have been very rapid, leading to the destruction of a civilization. That would explain the reference to Mount Ararat, which is the name of a mountain in modern day Turkey, south of the Black Sea.

3. There were other flood narratives in the area. The most similar to the Biblical account is the myth of a great flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which the gods send a flood to destroy erring humanity, but save the hero Utnapishtim and the craftsmen and animals he brings with him. There is also the Akkadian myth of the gods deciding to destroy all humans by a flood, but one of them, Enki, warning his human friend, Atrahasis, who escapes with his family in a boat. The gods eventually agree with saving that family because they need laborers to take care of the earth.

- But in those accounts the gods themselves seem unsure about what to do, argue among themselves and change plans. Furthermore, they save a remnant because they need us. Rather than the just family being central, it is the

craftsmen (representing human work) that the gods above all wish to preserve.

- The account in Genesis indicates that God loves us for our sake, not for what we do for Him. We are in His image and likeness, and He wants us to become worthy of that dignity.