

Noah and the Flood

As previously discussed, the created order of Eden and the world as it was directly after the fall is about to recede into the background in favor of a new creation. All that had gone before is about to be washed away and a new created order, the one we currently inhabit, will be ushered in. Perhaps the most novel aspect of what we are about to read is the idea of covenant that we encounter for the first time in the sixth chapter of the Book of Genesis:

“I, on my part, am about to bring the flood [waters] on the earth, to destroy everywhere all creatures in which there is the breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But with you I will establish my covenant.” Genesis 6:17-18

In Hebrew, the word for covenant is *berit*, a word derived from the verb meaning “to cut.” In ancient Israel, whenever an agreement or contract was enacted between two parties a sacrifice had to be performed to indicate the seriousness of the matter. In essence, sacrificing or “cutting” an animal indicated to those observing: “may this be done to the parties of this contract should they not live up to its’ conditions.” All covenants, each and every *berit* in ancient Israel, were accompanied by a sacrificial offering.

Now to our eyes, there is nothing terribly spectacular or out of the ordinary about God and Noah entering into a contract. As Roman Catholics we are people of the New Covenant, washed in the blood of the Lamb, the perfect sacrifice, Christ. We are the heirs of over three thousand years of covenants stretching back to God’s covenant with Noah. Therefore, we have gotten very used to covenantal language.

This was not the case for the people of the ancient Near East. Individual men (even rulers) could enter into a covenant with each other. It was not uncommon for one king to enter into a covenant with another nearby king. These treaties were either mutually beneficial (a parity treaty) or one in which a lesser king had to swear allegiance and fealty to a mighty king (a suzerainty treaty). Every once in a great while, even a great king like Nebuchadnezzar entered into a contract or treaty with his god, but this was very rare. What was never seen in the history of this region was the idea of a god entering into a contract with a normal human being.

One of the greatest gifts the Jews have given us is the idea that God can enter into a covenant with mankind. This is something new and remarkable in the history of the world, i.e., the idea that one group of people, one small relatively insignificant group of semi-nomads, could enter into an agreement with God. What makes it all the more remarkable is the fact that the covenant between Noah and God is an unconditional one. We get our first glimpse of this in Genesis 6:17-18 but will revisit it again in chapter nine. God requires little of Noah and gives everything. Most importantly, God will make this covenant an everlasting covenant. In Hebrew the phrase is *berit olam*, a covenant that cannot ever be broken.

We have to spend a little time in this sixth chapter of Genesis discussing covenant because it is one of the fundamental themes that permeate both the Old and New Testament. In the Book of Genesis we will be dealing with two unconditional covenants, the covenant with Noah (at times called the Noachic or Noachan covenant) and the covenant with Abraham (called the Abrahamic covenant). Both of these are very much one-way covenants, i.e., God gives everything and requires little in return. In addition, these are both everlasting covenants that cannot be broken by either party.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Ambrose

Every earthly thing dies with the deluge and only the righteous live forever. Thus the words "I will establish my covenant with you" are addressed to the righteous. He is the heir of divine grace, the recipient of the heavenly inheritance, a sharer of the very holy goods. On Noah 10.35

The Flood

Getting back to the story, one of the first questions that arises when beginning to read the flood account in the Book of Genesis is - why destroy everyone? Clearly the Lord put up with a lot of wickedness prior to this story (Adam and Eve's betrayal, Cain's murder of Abel) but did not destroy all creation. Yet the wickedness must have reached its breaking point in the mind of the Almighty:

"When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved. So the Lord said: 'I will wipe out from the earth the men whom I have created, and not only the men, but also the beasts and the creeping things and the birds of the air, for I am sorry I made them.' But Noah found favor with the Lord." Genesis 6:5-8

As angry as the Lord was (and we get another description of how angry the Lord was in Genesis 6:11-13), He decided to spare a remnant of His creation and begin again. Noah and his family are to be spared and will form the core of the new creation along with the animals they will take on the Ark. This raises our second question, i.e. why Noah? Noah was not a king, not a ruler, nor anyone particularly special by the standards of the ancient world.

He was simply “a good man and blameless”, a man who “walked with God” Genesis 6:9-10. It is with this man, whose only characteristic seems to be that he was good in the eyes of the Lord, that the first covenant between God and humanity will be established.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. John Chrysostom

Do you see how the Lord created our nature to enjoy free will? I mean, how did it happen, tell me, that while those people showed enthusiasm for wickedness and rendered themselves liable to punishment, this man opted for virtue, shunned association with them and thus felt no effects of punishment? Is it not crystal clear that each person chose wickedness or virtue of his own volition? You see, if that were not the case and freedom did not have its roots in nature, those people would not have been punished, nor would others receive reward for their virtue. Since, however, everything has been allowed to remain with our choice owing to grace from on high, punishment duly awaits the sinners, and reward and recompense those who practice virtue.

Homilies on Genesis 22.5

Multiple Flood Stories

As you read further in the Book of Genesis about the accounts of the Flood (both the preparation for the Flood and the goings on during those forty days and forty nights) you will invariably find yourself getting a little confused trying to keep track of all the details you are given. At one point the story recounts seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals being taken aboard the ark (Genesis 7:2-4). In another place you read that a pair of every animal, both clean and unclean, was taken aboard (Genesis 7:8-9). To repeat a phrase that you will encounter a lot in your reading of the Old Testament, “Fear not!” What we have here is the weaving together of two Flood stories that were preserved in the Jewish tradition, much like the two complementary (if slightly different) Creation accounts. As with the first Creation stories we are dealing here with both the Priestly tradition and the Yahwist tradition. Each inspired author is putting forth what his community remembered of the Flood story in its tradition. Just as in the first Creation account, we are more concerned with the divine truth the inspired authors are trying to convey than with small details such as the type of bird Noah released from the ark.

The flood story is the story of the first Covenant, a covenant with all creation, initiated by God between Himself and a man whom God saw as “good.” It will be an everlasting covenant and one which will form the basis for all subsequent covenants leading up to the New Covenant with Jesus Christ.