

The Flood Continues

As we discussed last time, the multiple strands of tradition that we see in the story of the Flood makes for some complicated reading. We are presented with several species of animals that were brought onto the ark, none of which fit together perfectly in terms of how many pairs there were, how many were unclean, etc. We must remember, however, that the biblical writer was not attempting to give an accurate ship's manifest of the ark's inhabitants, but to signify that all was done according to the command of the Lord *with an eye to the period that was to follow*. The Flood is an exciting story that includes heroic characters, a global natural disaster, and repeated warnings that went unheeded. The main import of the story, however, is not the disaster which befell the sinful, but the blessings that were bestowed upon the new created order. This is our created order, which began when the waters subsided.

When God remembered Noah and all the beasts with him in the ark, He made a wind blow over the earth. The waters subsided, the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth. At the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters abated (Genesis 8:1-3).

Prior to the end of the flood story, we are given a glimpse of what the post-flood world will look like. The biblical author has us pause for a moment to reveal an image that will be of utmost importance to subsequent Christian revelation: the image of the dove and the olive branch.

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark and sent forth a raven that went to and fro until the waters dried off from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove to see if the waters had subsided. The dove found no place to set her foot and she returned so he put forth his hand and brought her into the ark. He waited another seven days and again sent the dove out of the ark. The dove came back to him in the evening with a freshly plucked olive leaf in her beak, so Noah knew that the waters were subsiding from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him again (Genesis 8:6-12).

The dove is a sign of the beginning of something new, a sign that indicates a new creation, a new era, is occurring in human history. The baptismal images introduced in the flood narratives begin to emerge in each passage. A world immersed in sin was cleansed through the waters of the flood much as we are cleansed by the saving waters of baptism. The dove was present at the moment the waters receded, as God was present at the baptism of His Son. The appearance of both signals a new life is about to begin. The next time you read about the baptism of Jesus in the Gospels, when Our Lord descended into the waters of the River Jordan and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, remember this passage from Genesis.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, Bede the Venerable

And by a most beautiful conjunction the figure is in agreement with the fulfillment – a corporeal dove brought the olive branch to the ark which was washed by the waters of the flood; the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a corporeal dove upon the Lord when he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan. Not only the human beings but also the living things which the ark contained, and also the very wood from which the ark was made, prefigure us members of Christ and of the church after our regeneration. Through the anointing of the sacred chrism may we be signed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and may he deign to keep it inviolate in us who himself gave it [to us], Jesus Christ our Lord who with the almighty Father in the unity of the same Holy Spirit lives and reigns for all ages. Amen. Homily 1.12

It is no accident that the biblical author reveals the story of Noah in language similar to that of the Creation story in Genesis 1-2. Phrases such as the wind blowing over the waters, the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens remind us of the first creation account yet describe the new creation. The new created order put in place by God must be overseen by Noah and his family. It is their task to “be fruitful and multiply” - to repopulate the earth devastated by the flood. Although there are many allusions to the creation accounts in the beginning of the Book of Genesis, don’t be fooled into thinking that all we have here is a simple retelling of that first story, indeed, something new is going on here.

The New Creation

The waters recede and the flood disappears. The land that emerges after forty days is the land we occupy and the new rules that apply to this second creation are our rules. Before we examine this new created order, let’s look at the covenant ritual that precedes it. Remember, in the story of Noah we are dealing with the first covenant in the Old Testament. As with all covenants in the ancient Near East, a sacrifice has to be performed to emphasize the seriousness and sanctity of the event

“Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and choosing from every clean animal and every clean bird, he offered holocausts on the altar. When the Lord smelled the sweet odor, he said to himself: ‘Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the desires of man’s heart are evil from the start; nor will I ever again strike down all living beings as I have done. As long as the earth lasts, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.’” Genesis 8:20-22

As discussed earlier, the covenant established between God and Noah (and through him all creation) is an everlasting, unconditional covenant. This covenant cannot be broken by either party. Although it is unconditional and cannot be broken, the Lord lays out a few rules to govern the new created order. Let's take a look at the short list of rules that will now govern creation:

1. Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth. (Genesis 9:1 and 9:7)
2. Animals, properly slaughtered, are to be your food. (Genesis 9:3-4)
3. The taking of human life carries dire consequences for the perpetrator. (Genesis 9:6)

The first rule is not terribly new as we have seen it before in the creation account found in Genesis 1:28 as part of the first Divine blessing on humanity. However, the next two rules offer up something we haven't seen before. Originally animals were not to be eaten as food. Seed bearing plants and fruits were to be the main diet of the first humans (Genesis 1:29). In the post Flood created order, they could be eaten if properly slaughtered. We see here echoes of the kosher dietary laws that will form a big part of the Pentateuch, but more of that at a later time.

The next law brought forth is indeed a change. In the post-Eden created order, murderers were not to be killed as was recounted in God's conversation with Cain (Genesis 4:15-16). Now, it appears that blood will be required for blood: "*For your own lifeblood, too, I will demand an accounting...if anyone sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed*" Genesis 9:5-6. What is perhaps the most important in this, the third and final rule laid out post-flood, is the fact that the decision as to who gets to make that accounting lies firmly in the hands of God. Although there is a new created order, with a somewhat different role to be played by mankind, it is clear that God is still very much in charge and the rules that will govern the punishment for murder will be laid out by God and God alone.

The Magisterium and Genesis

*Man's life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life. God therefore is the sole Lord of this life: man cannot do with it as he wills. God himself makes this clear to Noah after the Flood: "For your own lifeblood, too, I will demand an accounting ... and from man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life" (GN 9, 5). The biblical text is concerned to emphasize how the sacredness of life has its foundation in God and in his creative activity: "For God made man in his own image" (Genesis 9, 6). Human life and death are thus in the hands of God, in his power...John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 39*

The Covenantal Sign

At the conclusion of the Flood story the Lord takes center stage one last time to finalize the agreement He is making between Himself and humanity:

“I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth.’ God added: ‘This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’” Genesis 9:11-13

One cannot overestimate the importance of this first covenant in the Old Testament. To say that this is something new in the history of creation is an understatement. What makes it doubly important is that this is the first in a long line of remarkable covenants that will be made between God and His creation. But this covenant, our first, is special. It comes at a time of creation, the new created order which we currently share. It comes after the cleansing waters of the flood have washed away the sin that had grown in the world and allowed for this new beginning. New life, new beginnings, and indeed a new covenant which arises after the defeat of sin are in the distance. We have taken the first step as a people along that path.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Gregory Nazianzus

Who 'binds up the water in the clouds'? The miracle of it – that he sets something whose nature is to flow, on clouds, that he fixes it there by his word! Yet he pours out some of it on the face of the whole earth, sprinkling it to all alike in due season. He does not unleash the entire stock of water - the cleansing of Noah's era was enough, and God most true does not forget his own covenant.

Theological Orations, 28.28

Flood Stories in Other Traditions

Invariably when one studies the story of the Flood in the Book of Genesis, questions are asked concerning the historical nature of the Flood. In line with this discussion questions concerning the Flood in other Near Eastern literary traditions arise. We know that the Judeo-Christian tradition is not alone in preserving a story of a cataclysmic flood. We can read similar accounts in ancient Sumerian literature such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Story of Atrahasis* which can both be dated to approximately 2000 BC. Clearly many ancient peoples in the Near East had a story about a massive flood that wiped out a significant portion of life in the area. Yet from the various accounts it would appear that the details differ considerably. This is to be expected from a story that was probably old by the time the divinely inspired authors were writing it down. All accounts look to the gods (and in our case God) as somehow causing the Flood. All accounts refer to a remnant of humanity being favored by the gods and forming a nexus with humanity. In some cases, most notably the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the god gives a sign (in this case a purple jeweled necklace) to signify that this tragedy will not occur again. Yet for all the similarities between our tradition and the tradition of the ancient Sumerians, one glaring difference remains – the account in Genesis is the only one in which an actual covenant was enacted between God and humanity. All have floods, all have death and destruction, and all have happy endings (for a few people at least). Only the tradition in the Old Testament has this event sealed with an everlasting agreement.