

Toward a Christian Theology of the Flood: Good News about God in the Biblical Narrative

The Problem

Combining “Christian theology,” “the Flood,” and “good news about God” may be an odd way to begin. *Theology* is, quite literally, “God talk”—that is, thinking and talking about God and God’s relation to other reality. *Christian* theology is thinking and talking about God in the light of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; and, as such, it says very positive things about God. That is why Christians often refer to their understanding of God as “the gospel.” So the question that confronts us is whether “good news about God”—the Gospel—can emerge from a consideration of God’s role in the Great Flood—and if so, how.

The first difficulty confronting the finding of “good news” in the story of an unprecedented catastrophe, lies in the scant amount of subsequent Scriptural attention to the Flood. Given the length of the Biblical narrative—more than three chapters totaling 86 verses (Gen. 5:32-9:17), compared with only two chapters totaling 56 verses for the two creation narratives combined (Gen. 1:1-2:25)—there are remarkably few subsequent references to the Flood or Noah in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible there is a genealogical reference to Noah (1 Chron. 1:4), a reference to the Flood as a precedent for the preservation of God’s people (Isa. 54:9), and a double mention of Noah as an example of those whose righteousness “would save neither son nor daughter” (Ezek. 14:14, 20). In the New Testament, the Flood is cited three times as a warning against ignorance of impending destruction (Matt. 24:37-38; Luke 17:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:20), and once as an example of divine judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). Noah is included among the ancestors of Jesus (Luke 3:36) and as an example of faith (Heb. 11:7). That is the extent of subsequent Scriptural references to the Flood.

Throughout the following centuries as well, comparatively little attention has been given to the theology of the Flood—other than as a kind of divine “un-Creation.” For Augustine the ark represented the church. Preachers from the time of Jesus (Luke 7:27) to today have used the unexpectedness, devastation, and extent of the Flood to illustrate the need to be prepared for the end of the world. Other expositors have noted that divinity in the Biblical story is monotheistic, in contrast to the multiple gods of surrounding cultures, and related to humanity by a covenant that involves election, revelation, intervention, and ultimate fulfillment. It has been suggested that the Flood story is a polemic against the idolatry connected with the Canaanite fertility religions.

The Challenge

In contrast, we are convinced that far and away the most important thing about the Flood narrative is its role as a revelation of the character, purposes, and actions of God—who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us. This function is a result of its disclosure of *who* God was understood to be and *what* God was understood to do by Moshe and his contemporaries.

Few if any Biblical narratives have been as pervasively and profoundly misunderstood as the narrative of the Flood. It is usually regarded as the story of the heroic human figure of Noah, and the catastrophic event itself is often identified as “Noah’s Flood.” But, in fact, the Genesis narrative of the Flood is, like the rest of Genesis and all of Scripture, first and



foremost *a story about God*. It is about the relation of Ultimate Reality to created reality, and to human reality in particular. The message is about God's values and commitments—the source of all human meaning and hope. From the beginning to the end of the Flood narrative, God initiates most of the action and does all of the talking while Noah does not utter a single word, although for the most part he does what God tells him to do—except in the postscript to the story, when he gets drunk (Gen 9:20-23). The narrative proper begins and ends with God: it begins with God's remorse over the attitudes and actions of humanity (6:1-7); it ends with God's commitment to preserve that humanity (Gen 9:12-17).

As the story begins, God is described as disappointed by the outcome of Creation, and as determined to obliterate the human race. This is, indeed, an unpromising place to begin our theological task: “YAHWEH was sorry that he had made humanity,” so YAHWEH said “I will eliminate . . . the people along with animals and creeping things and birds of the sky” (Gen 6:5-7).

Even if, (as we should), we understand this language as an expression of regret and sadness rather than anger and vindictiveness, it reports an unmistakable divine intention of zoocide—destroying not only all men, women, and children, but also almost all wildlife—every living thing but plants and fish. Why would the God who is the epitome not only of power but also of wisdom and creativity respond with this unparalleled intention of violence? Was this God's only option? By the end of the story it seems that even God thought it might have been too much; to Noah and his sons God promised explicitly that the Great Flood would never be repeated (Gen 9:9).

The theological challenge is further complicated by the Christian understanding of God as infinite, universal, unending love. How could the God whose character is definitively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth initiate the human and ecological disaster of the Great Flood?

The Solution

If a modern reader starts the Flood narrative not at the very beginning but shortly thereafter, the inescapable message is that after human beings had so messed up their world that it was headed for destruction, God came to the rescue, preserved life, and promised an everlasting future.



Moshe, however, had to start at the very beginning—with the cause of the mind-boggling disaster—rather than further along in the narrative. Along with the narrator he and his contemporaries had only two categories of causal explanation—*human choice* and *suprahuman choice*—with which to understand all known reality. Since the Flood was an event of such magnitude that it could not possibly have been the result of *human choice*, it was necessarily understood as the result of *suprahuman choice*: it was “an act of God”—and had to be described as such. If an event was so extraordinarily extensive that only the greatest possible power could have brought it about, and if the greatest possible power was God, there was nowhere else for an account of that event to begin. *For Moshe the Flood had to have been caused by God.*

Despite this quite unpromising beginning, the author(s), led by God's Spirit, did a truly remarkable job. Indeed, it was such a prodigious accomplishment that the story and the theological insights it provided have survived for more than 2,500 years. True enough, the theology was only a beginning and the concept of ethical monotheism was still in the process of formation, but hundreds of years later these early theological insights culminated in the ultimate divine revelation—Jesus of Nazareth.

The understanding that the Flood narrative gave to Moshe and his contemporaries was that God, while accepting responsibility for this unprecedented disaster, displayed at the same time the theologically important attributes of relationality, temporality, and vulnerability. Considering each of these attributes in turn in Chapter 10, we will undertake the task of highlighting the various ways in which the story of the Great Flood is indeed “good news about God.”