

# Dimensions of God's Love: The Flood Narrative as Divine Revelation

## The Persistent Question

In what sense (if any) can the Biblical narrative of the Flood be regarded as “good news”—that is, as a revelation of God’s infinite love—when its predominant feature is the elimination by drowning of all but a vanishingly small number of the human and animal inhabitants “from the land”?

Our first response is that three characteristics of God—relationality, temporality, and vulnerability—are not only obvious in the narrative but also dimensions of love. These characteristics are intrinsic to love—love in general and to God’s love in particular—and they enhance love. Our second response is that because God’s love is totally comprehensive, the events that God does not prevent, as well as those that God initiates, result *in the long run* in the greatest fulfillment and happiness for the whole of created reality. In the ancient Hebrew world, the basic idea of “judgment” was not *retribution* but *rectification* and *restoration*. The primary role of a judge was not to pronounce guilt and punishment but to *make things right*.

## God Is Relational

The Flood narrative begins with an affirmation of God’s intimate relation to and involvement with human existence. God was profoundly dismayed by the outcome of the original Creation, regretted having created humanity in the first place and determined to destroy all forms of life except fish and vegetation. The next sentence, however, suggests a softening of the traditional interpretation of divine outrage: “And Noah found favor in YAHWEH’s eyes” (Gen. 6:8).

Divine rescue is the point of the story from the very beginning—it is where the story is headed. “God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark” (8:1). Here the word translated “remembered” (*zakar*) means much more than simply “recalled.” It is covenant language that denotes faithfulness. The divine trajectory ends with the promise that life will be preserved by an ever-faithful God—good news!

God *interacts*. God is never a mere observer and/or evaluator of created reality. God is always an active participant, facilitating the good and restraining the evil, usually behind the scenes and “under the radar”. God continually interacts with created reality to fulfill the divine purpose of rescue and preservation; and the rescue is as universal as the devastation. So, finite human reality, even an individual human being, can have transcendent meaning. In other words, *I matter*. Thinking seriously about this good news is nothing less than mind-boggling.

## God Is Temporal

In the Biblical text, God appears as thoroughly temporal—experiencing surprise that the present is radically different from the divine intention, planning for the future in detail, and making permanent commitments. So obvious is the divine temporality in Creation, the Flood, the history of Israel, and the life of Jesus that one wonders how so astute and profound a theologian as Augustine of Hippo (354-430) could have been so wrong as to make temporality a decisive contrast between Creator and creation. Later the philosopher Boëthius (480-524) used the idea of “divine timelessness” to harmonize divine foreknowledge and human free will. Unfortunately, the idea of “divine timelessness” (or “timeless eternity”) largely dominated Western Christian thinking for the next 1300 years.

One might attempt to defend the idea of divine timelessness by arguing that the Biblical language here is anthropomorphic and need not be taken literally. But Christian spirituality and theology both insist on a God who acts and responds, thus the idea of “timeless action” (as distinct from “timeless being”) is logically incoherent. And, as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) observed, speaking nonsense of God is not an act of piety. Eternity is not timelessness but infinite time. This, too, is good news.

## God Is Vulnerable

Temporality has a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship with vulnerability (although it is not clear which came first historically or logically). While the narrative of the Flood certainly does not suggest that God is *ontologically* vulnerable (as if Ultimate Reality could somehow be threatened with nonexistence), it clearly indicates that God is susceptible to the pain of *rejection*, and also participates in the *suffering of persons beloved*. This is what we mean by God's "vulnerability." The Flood narrative begins with God's profound grief that human beings had so messed up themselves, each other, and their world that it seemed obvious to the human (although divinely-inspired) narrator that the best thing for God to do was to start over.

The idea that the infinite God is vulnerable to the effects of human action becomes both rationally understandable and theologically necessary in two ways. First, creating (and respecting the integrity of) morally free reality entails self-limitation and vulnerability. Second, to love truly is to care deeply, and to care is to make oneself vulnerable. God is vulnerable on both counts.

But even here there is good news. The narrative of the Flood includes the truth that God can be affected not only negatively, evoking sorrow and regret, but also positively—Noah was "blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God" (Gen 6:9 NIV). Instead of talking so much about the danger of *disappointing* God, we would do well to talk more about the possibility of *increasing God's shalom*.

## Conclusion



Responding to the traditional view of the Flood as divine retribution for human sin, we note that this makes God the perpetrator of "the mother of all genocides," an idea that is theologically and spiritually untenable. An authentically Christian theology of the Flood must be grounded in the ultimate truth that God is love. It is both inevitable and appropriate for Christians not only to read and hear the ancient narrative of the Flood through Christian eyes and ears—thus discerning meanings that became apparent only in the Christ event, but also to move beyond meanings that are excluded by the Christ event. Jesus himself did this: "You have heard it said..., but I say to you..." (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

Faced with an event of such magnitude that it could not possibly have originated as the result of *human* choice, Moshe and his contemporaries necessarily understood it as the result of *suprahuman* choice—hence "an act of God." Now, however, since the Flood involved massive quantities of water overwhelming (and reshaping?) continents Ian Michael inevitably thinks of the Flood as an event in *nature* that can be investigated by science. In so doing, he utilizes a conceptual explanation (explanaccept) that was unavailable to Moshe and his contemporaries.

When the Flood narrative was composed, theological conversation was just getting started. In listening to the story we must avoid demanding from the ancient text a kind of truth that was not then available. We must neither criticize the text for its "inadequacy," nor read into the ancient text a level of understanding that could not have been there. We must respect the text for what it is.

And we must not forget the covenant language of the Biblical narrative: "I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark" (Gen 6:18). The hallmark of love is acting for the good of the beloved. God acted decisively on behalf of the occupants of the ark. Much later in human history the author of the Fourth Gospel could write (with a fuller understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us), "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

