

THE STORY OF THE FLOOD

It is worth making a few comments about the story of Noah and the flood. While the Patristic commentators certainly noted the variations, inconsistencies and contradictions which occur in the flood story (Genesis 6-9), they endeavored to interpret the story to show that it is really one story. They assumed there was but one author for the text and therefore it fell upon them as the interpreters of the text to show how the text was internally consistent even when literally it couldn't be so. So they came up with ways to gloss over differences or harmonize them by offering explanations in which they tried to show how the text was consistent with itself.

Modern biblical scholarship on the other hand offers an insight into the scriptures which can help resolve some of the problems which a literal reading of the text presents. The insight of modern scholars is that in fact Genesis 6-9 is actually two separate stories that have been interwoven together by a third editor. This idea is contained in what is called Source Theory. It is way beyond my purposes to explain or defend Source Theory. I will only say it is an idea presented by modern biblical scholars based to a large degree on literary analysis of the biblical text. Source Theory is based in scholarship not in theology. Nevertheless it at times can be a very useful tool in helping to uncover a sensible understanding of some biblical passages and problems. I am making use of this tool in my reflections but am not endorsing every idea that gets proposed under the guise of Source Theory. Like most ideas in modern biblical scholarship Source Theory has branched in many directions, and not all of them are useful for an Orthodox reading of the Scriptures. Any tool can be dangerous, but we don't stop using a saw or a hammer because of the risk it represents; rather, we learn to use them with great caution.

Source Theory suggests that when reading a section of Scripture like Genesis 1-2 or Genesis 6-9, it becomes apparent that there are such strong literary/linguistic differences that the section cannot have been written by one author but is the work of several authors/editors/sources. If you allow in these particular chapters of Genesis that there are two distinct stories which have been interwoven you can come to see how each of the two stories is consistent in itself. The contradictions and inconsistencies are actually between the two stories which were woven together. Source Theory reminds us that ancient texts were originally oral stories. These stories belonged to and were authenticated by a religious community – the people of God, the Jews - not by a single “author.” There often existed within the community more than one version of a story that was valued by the community. It is only when the story gets committed to a written form that sometimes an effort is made to harmonize the stories, probably because the differences in the stories appear more jarring to us when actually written down. Oral tradition tolerated some variations in the community's story better than does a literary tradition. Source Theory says it is at times in Scripture possible to unwind the various threads that have been woven together into one story and to reconstruct the different original stories from these threads. This is merely a tool of interpretation. It can't undo the fact that the authorized version of the story as written down in our Scriptures presents one harmonized story. But it can point out that if one carefully studies the Bible one can detect two interwoven stories in one text. It is no different than looking at a bouquet of spring flowers – together they are quite beautiful, and yet they are “artificially” arranged as they don't occur in nature the way they do occur in the vase. Someone arranged the flowers in the vase, and the bouquet can be separated out to different kinds of flowers. Each flower or each species is also beautiful and we can appreciate the flowers singularly, separated by species, or placed together in a bouquet.

For our purposes, being able to distinguish a couple of stories within a biblical section does not mean that the scriptures are not inspired or from God. We will make use of Source Theory to help clarify some of the problems that arise from a purely literal reading of the. As it turns out, the biblical text of our immediate concern, Genesis 6-9, actually ends up having 3 “sources” which shaped it – the source of a first story, the source of a second story, and finally the editor who weaved the two stories together. Discerning the different “hands” which had a role in composing the written story, can at times help us to understand what we otherwise note as inconsistencies or even contradictions. Using Source Theory in reading the Flood story is using a tool to uncover the deeper meaning of the text. Tools of interpretation are good servants and bad masters. We do not need to become a slave to the theory in reading the

God Questions His Creation: The Story of the Flood

Bible, but certainly using a tool of interpretation can help us uncover the deeper meanings of the text which the Fathers of the Church valued so highly.

To take a totally secular comparison – this is like having two “competing” sports writers from two competing sports cities, newspapers and teams write a description of the big game. One ends up writing from the position of the losing team and one is the writer of the game for the winning team. They both will be describing the same game, but no doubt their emphases will be totally different. Who gets credited for the win and loss, what went right and wrong, we would really have two different stories. But then imagine that on Monday morning, a third sportswriter sits down and attempts to weave the two opposing accounts of the game together into a “harmonious” account. Perhaps you get the picture- it might be very hard to get the two stories to correspond exactly because the authors would have emphasized different things.

Without going into too great of detail, the two main sources of the Genesis Flood story are known as the J-source and the P-Source. The J-source is thought to have been written about the 10th Century BC. The J-source refers to God by Name – YHWH is God’s Name (this is a real name like JOHN or MARY). It was considered so sacred that it was never pronounced. Many English Bibles do not use YHWH for the Name of the Lord, but will substitute for His Name the words in all capital letters the LORD, or perhaps LORD GOD. So when you are reading Genesis 6-9 and you see the LORD know you are probably reading the J-source author. The God of the J-source is very personal and active in history. The description of the LORD is very anthropomorphic (meaning God behaves much like a human being). The LORD frequently makes promises and also will curse the disobedient. The J-source is also said to have written the second story of creation found in Genesis chapter 2 beginning with verse :4.

Another source identified by scholars is called the P-source. The P-source wrote about 550BC perhaps 400 years after the J-source. (the stories may be much older than this, 550BC is simply when scholars believe the oral stories were put into their final written form). The P-source is very concerned with Israel’s priest class and the temple. The P-sources never uses God’s name but always refers to God by the generic word “God” which is not a name but word for the divine being. The God of the P-source is far more transcendent and distant from humanity than the God described in the J-Source. This God gives many blessings for increase and fruitfulness and likes to offer both genealogies and covenants. The P-source is said also to have written the first creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3.

The final editor who brought these two sets of stories together is also thought by scholars to have worked about the same time as the P-source. Some scholars think the P-source may also have been the final editor of the bible that we now accept as authoritative.

As you are reading these chapters take note whether the verses are referring to God as the LORD or as God. This will be one clue to help distinguish the two stories. Remember you don’t have to choose between the two stories. Those who were inspired by God to formulate our scriptures saw value in both stories and attempted to weave them together while leaving in some of the discrepancies. This may in fact tell us that the final editor inspired by God did not in fact think that a literal reading of the text which harmonizes every detail is in fact the best way to understand the story of the flood, nor the way to get the most out of the scriptural lesson. The two stories together add richness and depth to the entire narrative. And if we get past the troubling literal inconsistencies we realize there is a tremendous consistency in truth – the truth about humanity, the truth about God the LORD, and the truth about our relationship to God our LORD. Our conception of God is enriched by the very different ways that God is portrayed.

The two stories do not contradict the main point that God both attempts to rid the world of sin and to respect the free will of humanity. God does not abandon humanity to its own fate but endeavors to continue to influence events in the world for the salvation of the world. It is a story of God’s undying and steadfast love for His very wicked and rebellious creatures. It is a story which develops a major theme of scripture – God is a saving God, and God will rescue His servants even if they are but a tiny remnant on earth. God commits Himself in the story to working out His plan for His creation through the people He will save from the flood. But God also acknowledges with a sorrowful heart that His beloved humans have wickedness in their hearts from when they are young. This will be as true of the people God saves

God Questions His Creation: The Story of the Flood

in the ark as of those destroyed in the flood. God saves them anyway as He is intent on working out His purposes in and through humanity.

So as you are reading through the chapter texts themselves (NOT when you are stopping every few verses to read my reflections but just when you are reading the Biblical text itself), try identifying those sections belonging to the J-source and to the P-source. If you feel that the verses in these chapters sometimes seem chronologically out of sync – like it moves back and forth in time, that is probably due to places in the text where the story shifts from P to J and back again. Or if you notice contradictions in details (7 pairs of animals as versus 2 pairs of animals, how many days the flood lasts, and so on), you probably are seeing the differences in the details of the two stories.

Source Theory cannot explain to the satisfaction of many modern scientific thinkers in what sense the text is true – literally, historically, and scientifically. Source Theory only helps us deal with some of the literal contradictions and inconsistencies by showing that there appears to be more than one literary source from which the final editor of the Bible drew.

As is noted in the reflections, even the ancient pre-scientific Christians of the 4th Century had difficulties with believing every literal details of the story. The Holy Bishop John Chrysostom in the 4th Century cautioned his flock against overly trying to rationalize about the text. He felt there are some things that do not make logical sense but we have to just accept them in order to get to the real purpose of the story which is to teach us both about the God who is the Savior of the world, and the coming day of Judgment. Theodoret of Cyrus, a bishop of the Antiochian tradition in a generation after Chrysostom, notes at several points in his commentaries that interpreting scriptures in different ways is completely acceptable when the issue is not about the doctrine of the Trinity. He sees no harm to religion occurring in instances where different interpretations can be determined, and even allows for the readers of the text themselves to determine which interpretation seems closer to the truth to them.

None of this is to say that it is wrong to believe the texts are literally true. My reflections however do not rely on a literal reading of the texts to point out their eternal truths. A literal reading of the text is one way to approach the text, but the literal reading of the text is not even the primary way that the New Testament writers read and understood the Old Testament texts. The reflections point out how the New Testament made use of these Old Testament stories – as allegory, as prophecy, as **typology**, and as a moral teaching.

While the Source theory helps us to understand the inconsistencies within Genesis 6-9 by unwinding the two stories which were woven together, both stories are completely monotheistic in their message. There is only one God who is the main actor in either story, and both stories are about this same one God whether He is referred to by Name (YHWH, the LORD) or simply as God. But different people were inspired to write differently reflecting their own understandings of God the LORD. This is part of the beauty of inspiration. God is so much different than any one mind can grasp. And so God reveals Himself in story and narration, in figurative images, to help us realize the limits of our ability to describe the incomprehensible God.

Having more than one story forces us to think beyond the plain sense of the Scriptures and to seek out the deeper meaning which God chooses to reveal to us in more than one way. We do not have to explain the differences in the stories, but we must come to understand the depth of their revelation. As St. John Chrysostom said, “Pay precise attention, however: the reading out of the Scriptures is the opening of the heavens.” Orthodox in later generations will also refer to icons as windows into heaven. Obviously the revelation of God, in whatever form it comes to us gives us a view into heaven itself.

Remember, deciding to read the Scriptures literally means making literalism your method for interpreting the text. Reading the text literally will force the literalist to interpret the text so that the 40 days of the flood do not contradict the 150 and 340 days of the flood also mentioned in the text. The literalist must interpret what it means that God “came down” to Ba’bel to see the tower – couldn’t He see it from where

God Questions His Creation: The Story of the Flood

He was? Is God near-sighted? Or is the text saying or implying something other than its plain meaning? Literalism is a form of interpretation of Scriptures.

There is always a temptation when reading Scriptures to try to explain away problems and difficulties to ease our doubts. But in so doing we often have to discard what the text actually says in favor of some explanation of the text. Then the explanation becomes the Scripture and the Scripture becomes simply that on which the inspired writing comments. Orthodox scripture readers will sometimes gloss over the actual Scripture and rush to the footnotes in the ORTHODOX STUDY BIBLE as if the footnotes are the inspired part and the Scriptures are the stumbling block which slow our race to the get to the truth. As one commentator on the Old Testament wrote, "There is tremendous interpretive pressure to raise the valleys and lower the hills, to make the way straight and level before the reader. But a reading faithful to this book, at least, should try to describe the territory with all its bumps and clefts, for they are not merely flaws, but the essence of the landscape" (M. Fox, QOHELET AND HIS CONTRADICTIONS). Source Theory at least takes every word of the Scriptures seriously and looks to discover their meaning without trying to gloss over inconsistencies and contradictions. It makes us read the Scriptures as they are in the received text rather than using mental gymnastics to try to make the text say something that refutes the very words of the text.

As a final note to give us a little more comfort with ambiguity when reading the Scriptures, and to challenge our tendency to drift into literalness, consider the following fact about the Ten Commandments. Even Christians who know little about the Bible have heard of the Ten Commandments. We often think they are ten clear laws which no one can tamper with and which no one would be willing to debate what they are. The reality is that if you compare what modern Judaism claims are the Ten Commandments with what the Church Fathers believed and what modern Catholics and Lutherans believe, you would discover that although all talk about the Ten Commandments, the groups do not agree on what the 10 commandments actually are. The first commandment for the Church Fathers was that you shall have no other gods before the Lord. In Judaism the first commandment simply is "I am the Lord your God" – it is a reaffirmation of monotheism. For Catholics/Lutherans the first commandment is that we are not to put other gods before the Lord nor are we to have images of any kind. In Judaism the 2nd Commandment is not to have other gods before the Lord and not to have images of God. For the Church Fathers the 2nd Commandment concerns no false images, and for Catholics/Lutherans the 2nd commandment is about false oaths. The 3rd commandment for the Church Fathers and modern Jews forbids false oaths, while for Catholics/Lutherans it is to keep the Sabbath holy. For the rest of the commandments Modern Judaism agrees with the list of the Church Fathers, while Catholics and Protestants have a different numbering system. So before we get too upset with the various interpretations of the scriptures, note that in something as fundamental as the Ten Commandments Jews, early Christians and modern Catholics/Lutherans do not all agree on how to number the 10 commandments. This doesn't alter the text which is relied on, nor does it discredit the revelation. It only tells us that interpretation plays a role in how various religious groups interpret the basics of the faith.