

The conclusion of the flood

Like Genesis 1-3, the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9 is as much if not more about us today and what it means to be human than it is a story about the past and the history of ancient peoples. The story of the flood is fully empowered by symbolic thinking – symbols that God chose to use and men inspired by God recorded to teach, reprove, correct, and train us in righteousness and to equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). It isn't meant to be read just as past history. The New Testament writers did not limit the flood story to being a record of the deeds of men of old. The story isn't merely about the history of an ancient flood; it is the story about how God relates to a fallen and sinful world. It is the story about God's judgment of humanity, as well as God's impending judgment of humanity. It is a story of prophecy, preparedness, expectation and fulfillment. God has a particular relationship with the world. The story is also about the future, and a Creator God who has expectations for the world and will hold the humans on earth accountable for what they do with their stewardship of the earth. God doesn't interfere with our free will. However He does hold us accountable for what we do. To limit the value of this Scripture to whether the story is literally true and to get bogged down in the literal details to the exclusion of its symbolism and higher meaning is to miss much of the importance of the story. It is to fall seriously short of how Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers understood and made use of the story. The story is a warning – whether it is history, a parable or a prophecy - the end result is the same: we are told by the Lord that He is a God of expectation and judgment and we must conform to His will and His standards. It is not our standards which count. It is not how we judge the story of the flood which matters, but how ultimately the story will be judgment on us if we fail to understand its deepest prophetic meaning.

The point of Genesis 6-9 is: How are we supposed to live as a result of the narrative and the lessons it contains? The point isn't "what kind of science does it teach us?" Rather we are to ask, "What does it mean for our future and for our present?" We don't read it mostly to learn about past history or to learn about science. The story intentionally points beyond itself to a future reality – to the reality of God's purposes, for the story tells us about God even with grief in His heart accepting the role that the sinful humans must play in His plan. If the story's main purpose is to teach ancient history, what difference does it make? God promises in the story never to flood the earth again, so why should we care about something that will never happen to us or the world again? The story is prophecy and revelation, it is a teaching story and it teaches pretty well. The lesson is about how we are to live today in this world and why. Why should we care about what God thinks? How am I to act knowing there is a God who is Lord, Creator, Judge and Savior of the universe? The believability of the story doesn't lie in its literal accuracy of describing past events, but in its revelation that God is Creator, Savior and Judge, and that I am answerable to Him. Belief isn't mostly about accepting the literalness of the text, but is about "how am I to live as a believer?" St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444AD) argued that Genesis does not tell us everything that can be known about the early history of humankind; rather it offers us only that which is "useful for orienting one's life." The story is essential to us because it speaks about how to live today not because it teaches us past history. Belief isn't mostly about what I think about the ancient past, but what I think about the future and therefore how I am to live now. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval" (Hebrews 11:1-2). Belief is the basis for our actions as we move into the future. Belief is not mostly our position in regard to the literalness of the Bible, for the Bible itself never makes a literal reading of scripture the test for whether or not we are believers. The test of our being believers is how we live – are we willing to love God and neighbor as ourselves? Are we willing to live in this world always bringing to bear the Kingdom of God which is to come into our every decision and by our decisions witnessing to our faith in that coming Kingdom? The story of the flood is important because of how belief shapes our daily lives. "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24-25).

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The story of the flood invokes in us memory of the opening sentences of Genesis 1 in which God creates dry land from the chaotic abyss of waters. God imposed His order on creation and defied all the other powers of the universe- malevolent or simply chaotic. The order that exists in the universe according to Genesis is the result of God's own intervention in the abyss when he tames the powers of chaos to produce an orderly universe which allows life to exist. Today some biblical fundamentalists, creation scientists and Intelligent Design adherents want to argue that the order in the universe is the ultimate proof of God's existence. Interestingly, as historian Robert Wilken noted, the Christian apologists of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries took a different tact when considering the laws of nature which seem to govern the universe. "They did not argue that there is a God because there is order; rather they saw design in the universe because they knew the one God." (TSOECT) Or as Hebrews 11:6 puts it: "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." In other words, those who fear that science and evolution disprove the existence of God are demonstrating their own lack of faith; they are not proving or even defending the existence of God. The stories of Genesis are not as much an accounting of the exact history of our human ancestors as they are an exposition of what it means to be human, an explanation for the existence of evil, and a contextualizing of the human dilemma and story within the context of the larger narrative of the universe which is being told by God and still unfolding before us.

A brief final comment about the Source Theory which I utilized in my reflections: Source theory in a very particular way reveals to us that the final editor of our Bible, himself inspired by God, recognized God's hand in giving him more than one version of a story to include in the Scriptures. The editor is indeed a third human hand in the writing of the Scriptures; he adds his work to that of the J-Source and the P-Source. However, if we unwind the story into its two component parts - J and P - each strand seems to read pretty well by itself, which suggests the final editor didn't add much material but utilized what he had. He did rearrange a few lines, but if he added anything to what he received it is minimal. Some Source Theorists actually think the same "hand" that recorded the P-Source is the same hand that is the final editor of the text. If that is true, what is amazing is that he kept in the final edited version (our Bible) ideas from the J-source that contradict his own thinking. In that sense he apparently did think the J-source material was in fact inspired by God and so dared not edit it out! Thus Source Theory actually lends credence to the notion of the divine inspiration of Scripture. The human temptation to clean up the story and to get rid of materials contradicting his own ideas were stayed by the hand of God which was guiding what the final editor wrote.

If the story of the ark is one of salvation, what constitutes salvation for Noah? The story certainly is about escaping death, which in the story is an "ultimate" destruction. Though the rest of the world dies, destroyed by the flood, Noah and his family elude death – at least for the moment. However, the story of the ark is not about getting to heaven or about eternal life. There is no discussion in the story about life everlasting or the grandeur of heaven or about anything invisible. The story is about this earth and life in this world, yet it sets the stage for understanding Christ and life in the world to come. The story is very importantly a typology. It gives us a glimpse into what salvation is, and what it means to overcome death. But it still is all about events that happen within the confines of this fallen world. It is only when we understand the story as a typology, do we see how it is but a sketch or model of the real salvation which will be revealed in Jesus Christ. The Noah story is very much like the Exodus story which is also a typology. In the Exodus story the people of God move from captivity and slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. At Pascha in the Orthodox Church we recognize the Passover and Exodus story as a typology of Pascha, the resurrection of Christ. In the final and fulfilled Pascha, the people of God no longer move from Egypt to the Promised Land, but now as we sing at Pascha, we sojourn "from death to life, and from earth to heaven", for that is where Christ our God leads us. The Exodus Passover is a prototype of the ultimate Passover which is the event to which the original Passover points and from which it derives its meaning. Similarly, the story of the flood is a typology which helps us understand salvation in Jesus Christ. However, there is a great difference between the Noah story and the Christ story. In the Noah story Noah escapes death – a first time - by being in the

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ark. Nevertheless, despite being saved from a destruction which kills every other human being except Noah and his family, Noah eventually succumbs to death (Genesis 9:29). Jesus Christ on the other hand does not escape death the first time. He dies on the cross. He however is raised from the dead to live eternally. Noah escapes the death which kills all the rest of humanity, only to die later. Christ does not escape the death which claims all of humanity, but then rises from the dead and destroys death. In Christ we begin to see the symbolic and real importance of the Noah story. The ark story is a type – it shows us the way in which God deals with evil, sin and death. But God's ultimate plan, of which the Noah story was just a preliminary sketch, is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the fulfillment of the plan which ultimately shows us what the sketch was trying to reveal. That is how typology works. Noah's salvation was for the life of the world, but it was a temporary sparing of his life. Christ's life was not spared – also for the life of the world - but His death is an eternal destruction of death and the bestowing of life on all.

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