

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

WEEK 4: Genesis 8-10

SUMMARY OF THE FLOOD STORY

Last week we saw that the biblical flood story draws on elements of other flood stories from the ancient Near East as well as slightly different versions told by different traditions at different times from within the people of Israel which were then co-mingled and put together by a later redactor or editor into the version we have today.

The story answers the question: “How is God different from all the other gods in the other flood stories from the peoples around them?” The answer: The God of Israel is not the type of God who wipes out all of life because God needs to get more sleep. The God of Israel is a God who created order out of chaos and likes things done decently and in order. Divine beings cavorting with human women violates the order of creation (See Genesis 6:1-4). The wickedness of humans has gotten out of hand and God regrets having made humans to begin with. Humanity has failed to follow God’s ways that lead to life. They have chosen the path to death. And so, it is time for a clean slate but a remnant of one who is righteous and blameless will be saved and used to start over again.

This makes God seem extremely harsh; killing everyone and everything, except the family of Noah. But think about the story from the perspective of ancient Israel. A deadly flood, that had occurred in the past, had to be explained somehow. And so, they use this story about the flood to explain how their God is different from the other gods. Their God has standards that God expects to be upheld by God’s creatures. They violated those standards across the board. So, God wipes the slate clean and starts over.

THE POST FLOOD STORY

At the end of the flood story, God promises not to flood the earth again and gives a sign of this promise, the bow in the clouds (notice the etiology here explaining the existence of rainbows). The sign says that God has hung up God’s bow (a weapon) and God will never again be at war against the earth). From that moment on, God will use a different strategy for addressing the problem of humanity’s faithlessness (lack of loyalty). What God establishes is a covenant. This is a very important word or concept in the bible. A covenant is an agreement, an oath, a relational bond between two beings. This idea of the covenant is unique to the Israelite flood story. Other flood stories don’t end this way. In those stories, the gods are angry, everybody dies, except maybe one, and the gods are satisfied. But this God is different. This God commits to living with people in a new way, a way in which life is preserved and respected. In some ways, this was their way of coping with the natural phenomena of floods. Imagine what those did to your psyche. If floods were caused by the gods who were angry or disgruntled with humanity (their natural explanation for floods), then it makes sense that the Israelites would tell their story this way also. But theirs ends with the twist, not only does God save someone and the other creatures of the earth, but God also makes a promise to them. And what this tells the Israelites is that this is not a God who wants to wipe them out, but wants to live in relationship with them.

God then gives the command for them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth which is an intentional echo of the Genesis story (see Genesis 1:28).

What’s interesting about what happens after the flood, is that the whole reason for the flood, the need to start over with a clean slate, doesn’t work. Noah gets off the boat, plants a vineyard, and then has too much to drink and passes out drunk in his tent and he’s naked.

But the issue isn’t about Noah getting drunk. The issue isn’t about Noah passing out naked. The issue is about how his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, react to the situation. It is from these three sons that the bible says all the peoples of the earth have descended.

HAM AND HIS BROTHERS REACT (One of these kids is not like the others)

Ham finds his dad naked, looks, and goes out to tell his brothers. His brothers, out of respect, walk in backwards, refuse to look, and put a blanket on him to cover him up. One “sees” the “nakedness” and the others don’t. What echo do we hear here? The last time the bible talked about “seeing” “nakedness” was in the garden. Who saw that they were

naked? Adam and Eve. Why? Because they had chosen to disobey God and chose to attain the knowledge of good and evil apart from God. And therefore, they were cursed.

WHAT DID HAM DO TO NOAH?

The scriptures says that Noah woke up and knew what Ham had done to him. What was it? Was it simply that he saw his nakedness? Or was it something more?

The question we naturally ask ourselves is this: Why would Ham seeing the nakedness of his father deserve such a stiff punishment? What is going on here? Think about the garden with Adam and Eve. When they saw that they were naked they were what? Ashamed. The text doesn't say anything about Ham expressing shame. But the actions of his brothers show respect and a fear of the shame of seeing their father naked. (Notice the etiological element: children feeling awkward and ashamed at seeing their parents naked. Think about how this story explains why teens don't want to talk to their parents about sex. A story of origins). The other question we have to ask ourselves is this: Why isn't it Ham that is cursed? Why is it his son?

FATHER HAM

Notice that the text says that Ham was the father of someone. Who? Canaan. Think about what is going on here for the Ancient Israelites and what will happen later in the story. What happens to the Canaan as a result of his father's action? He is cursed: "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." Verses 25-27 are really important. Canaan will a slave to Shem who will be blessed and God will make space for Japheth and let him live in the tents of Shem. Think about the implications and who their descendants are said to have been. It's important to note who gets blessed and who and their descendants get cursed. In chapter eleven, we are going to see what happens further.

All of this makes sense when we remember that this is part of Israel's story told from a later point of view. The Canaanites play a major role in Israel's story. They are the archenemies of Israel. They live in the land God promised to Israel through Abraham. They are the people God commands the Israelites to exterminate after the Exodus. They will be a thorn in Israel's flesh until they are finally driven out during the reign of King David. This post-flood story is used as an etiology to explain why the hated Canaanites deserved everything they happened to them. They have been an accursed race since the beginning—because Ham saw Noah's nakedness. From these three children, from Noah, seventy nations fill the world (see chapter 10 for the list of names).

WHAT DO THESE NAMES MEAN?

Think about who is writing this story or putting these names together. People who were exiled and taken captive in a foreign land who are determined to remember that they are the people of God. The genealogy shows that the Israelites, the descendants of Shem, were the center of God's plan after the flood.

The first son of Noah: Japheth. Fourteen nations descend from him. They occupy what is now parts of Turkey and Greece along with areas further north. Each of these nations has its own language (remember this for next week).

Ham is mentioned second. He is the ancestor of pretty much anyone will give the Israelites some sort of trouble later on in their history (thirty nations are mentioned in Genesis 10:6-20) particularly the Canaanites, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians. The latter two settle in Shinar (remember this for next week as well). And they, too, have their own group of languages.

Finally Shem and his family are listed. "Shem" is where the word "Semitic" comes from which for us today has become a synonym for "Jewish." Here it refers to the people group from which the Israelites came. The list of his descendants fast-forwards us to Abraham, the central figure of Israel's humble beginnings. Where Seth's family tree pointed us to Noah, Shem's family tree points us to Abraham.

The list of nations shows the people spreading out throughout the world after the flood, just like they were supposed to do (see Genesis 9:1, 7). They are fruitful and multiplying, yielding 70 nations.

A MAN OF THE SOIL

Something else to think about: Noah was a man of the soil; the first to plant a vineyard. Who else was a man of the soil? What echo is being played out here? (See Genesis 4:2) Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain was a tiller of the ground. Both made an offering to God. Why was Abel's offering accepted by God but Cain's wasn't? Abel offered the first fruits of his flock. Cain didn't offer the first fruits of his produce. His was simply an offering of fruit (See Genesis 4:3). In a premeditated fit of jealous rage, he killed his brother. Like his parents, Cain chose death.

What is his punishment? He will no longer be a farmer, but now must be a "restless wanderer." Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden. Cain is exiled from God's presence and begins cavorting with the people of Nod. (Where did these people come from again?). But what does he do? Instead of wandering, like God had told him, he builds a city for his son Enoch.