

Parashat Noach (Genesis 6.9-11.32]

Introductory comments

Nahum Sarna: The Flood

The Flood is a cosmic catastrophe that is actually the undoing of creation. The action progresses in four stages. Noah receives detailed instructions from God as to how to ensure his survival and carries these out to the letter (6.9-22). Then the Flood is unloosed with all its intended devastation (chap. 7). Third, the Flood comes to its appointed end (8.1-14). Finally, the harmony between God and humanity is restored and the reordering of the world is decreed (8.15-9.17).

The Mesopotamian Background. The very notion of a deluge of cataclysmic proportions raises the question as to the origin and historic setting of the narrative. It is unlikely that the topography of the Land of Israel, a hilly country with a dry climate, could have served as the source of inspiration. No accumulation of clay deposits, the telltale evidence of extensive flooding, has been uncovered in excavations there. None, for instance, is present in Jericho, a town that dates back 9,000 years. Indeed, rabbinic lore has it that the Land of Israel was exempt from the Flood. [**QUESTION FOR CLASS:** Further on, Sarna states, “only in Genesis is the concept of a single family of man possible; indeed, it is a major theme.” What impact does the rabbinic teaching mentioned here have on this theme?]

Mesopotamia, on the other hand, supplies a natural locale for a flood tradition. Both cuneiform documents and archaeological research provide abundant testimony to periodic inundation of the flat alluvial valley between the Tigris and Euphrates. Torrential rains coupled with seasonal cyclones, and the early melting of the snows in the mountains of Anatolia, have from time to time combined to cause the rivers to burst their banks and turn the land into hundreds of miles of lake. It is not surprising that it is Mesopotamian civilization that produced the popular flood stories of the ancient Near East, stories that have come down to us in several versions and recensions.

The fullest extant narrative is that found in the 11th tablet of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. However, the flood episode in that version is a late addition to the story. Its parent version was the Atranasis Epic, a history of the human race from creation to the flood and its aftermath.

The Mesopotamian story even survived into Hellenistic times. The Babylonian priest Berossus (3rd century B.C.E.) included it in his history of Babylon. The name of the hero differs from version to version. In Gilgamesh, it is Utnapishtim, which means “He found [everlasting] life”; Atranasis means “exceedingly wise”; Ziusudra of the Sumerian epic, Grecized by Berossus as Xisuthros, denotes “life of long days.” The different accounts also vary in other details. Nevertheless, the literary structure and wealth of descriptive material common to them all warrant the conclusion that they are interdependent.

There is also good reason to believe a single historic event inspired the original composition. It is from present-day Fara, the site of ancient Shuruppak, where Utnapishtim lived, that we have archaeological evidence of a devastating deluge. Similar fluvial deposits from the same date, about 2900 B.C.E., have turned up in the excavations at Kish.

Moreover, it can now be independently established that the mythical hero Gilgamesh was actually a historical figure, a king of Uruk, as was Ubartutu, a king of Shuruppak and father of Utnapishtim. Similarly, Ziusudra was a king of the same town.

Genesis and the Mesopotamian Accounts. It is safe to conclude that the parallels between the biblical account of the Flood and the Mesopotamian stories, being so numerous and detailed, are much more than the result of mere coincidence. Yet it cannot be claimed that any version presently known is the direct source of the biblical narrative, for the latter has points of contact with each version while it also contains items independent of them all.

In the Bible, the Flood is a climactic turning point in a larger history of humankind that begins with the history of the world. The identical situation is present in the Sumerian, Atrahasis and Berossus stories, and it is reflected in the Sumerian King List.

A crucial point of departure by the Torah from all these versions is the deliberate divine decision to save the hero, which is communicated to him directly. In the Mesopotamian tales, humanity was supposed to have been completely wiped out; the rescue of the hero occurred inadvertently, by dint of the perfidy and subterfuge of one of the gods acting against the intent of the others.

The motivation of the deities in causing a flood is not recorded in Gilgamesh or Berossus, while in the Atrahasis story the flood is the gods' solution to the tumult of mankind, which increasingly disturbs their sleep. This is apparently another way of describing the problem of overpopulation.

In Genesis, the Flood is God's response to the pollution of the earth by the moral corruption of the human race, and there is not the slightest doubt it is Noah's integrity that determines his fate. In Atrahasis and Berossus, the hero also appears to be famed for his piety and integrity, but there is no explanation for the favor shown to Utnapishtim. Both Noah and Xisuthros belong to the tenth generation of antediluvians; in the Sumerian King List there are eight such, and the other versions are silent on the place of the hero in the chronological scheme. While the biblical Noah is an ordinary person, the heroes of the parallel versions are of royal blood.

The duration of the deluge is not uniform in the various accounts. Atrahasis and the Sumerian version have seven days and seven nights followed by the shining sun. In Gilgamesh, there seem to be six days of inundation. Berossus gives no information on the subject, nor do the Mesopotamian accounts report on the time it took for the earth to dry up. By contrast, Genesis has a precise chronology for the various stages of the Flood.

Perhaps the most significant of all the distinctive features of the Torah account is that only Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives enter the ark, whereas in the other accounts the builders of the vessel, the boatman, relatives, and friends are passengers with the hero and his family. This means only in Genesis is the concept of a single family of man possible; indeed, it is a major theme.

From all the foregoing, it is clear that our biblical account constitutes an independent Israelite version that is nevertheless closely related to the Mesopotamian traditions. It is likely that underlying the present prose narrative was an earlier poetic composition, the substratum of which may still be discernible. This would account for the occurrence of so many unique or rare words, such as *gofer*, *kinnim*, *tsohar*, *mabbul*, *y'kum*, and *keshet*. It would also explain poetic sentences such as 7.11 and 8.22, as well as the sevenfold repetition of so many key words. When Isaiah 54.9 refers to "the waters of Noah" rather than to "the Flood," for instance, there may be a citation from some ancient popular source not otherwise preserved. There is every reason to believe that in ancient Israel, as in Mesopotamia, more than one version of the great flood story once circulated, each distinguished by characteristic vocabulary and emphasis on certain details. As a matter of fact, many modern scholars claim it is still possible to isolate the various pre-Pentateuchal strands of Israelite tradition utilized by the Narrator in producing the present, definitive Torah edition of the Flood story. The evidence for this is taken to be the existence of doublets, the differences in the divine names—sometimes *Adonai*, sometimes *'elohim*—and stylistic variants for the same thing. There are also said to be internal differences in matters of chronology and in the number of animals to be brought into the ark, though these items can be otherwise explained. [This will be discussed in Sarna's essay.]

Whatever be its literary history, the Flood story of the Torah stands out as an authentic, original expression of the religious genius of Israel. Conceptually, spiritually and morally, it stands in striking contrast to all the other versions.

THE FLOOD AND CREATION

The uncompromisingly moral tenor and didactic purpose of the Genesis Flood story have influenced its literary artistry. Because humanly wrought evil is perceived to be the undoing of God's creativity, numerous elements in the story are artful echoes of the Creation narrative. Thus the divine decision to wipe out the human race employs the same two verbs that are used in the original Creation, but transposed in order to symbolize the reversal of the process (6.7; cf. 1.26-27). The Deluge itself is brought about by the release and virtual reuniting of the two halves of the primordial waters that had been separated in the beginning (7.11; cf. 1.1, 6-7). The classification of animal life in 6.20 and 7.14 corresponds to that in 1.11-12, 21, 24-25. The provisioning of food in 6.21 depends upon 1.29-30. Noah is the first man to be born after the death of Adam, according to the chronology of 5.28-29, and he becomes a second Adam, the second father of humanity. Both personages beget three sons, one of whom turns out to be degenerate. Noah's ark is the matrix of a new creation and, like Adam in the Garden of Eden, he lives in harmony with the animals. The role of the wind in sweeping back the flood waters recalls the wind from God in 1.2. The rhythm of nature established in 1.14 is suspended during the Flood and resumed thereafter, in 8.22. Finally, the wording of the divine blessing in 9.7 repeats that in 1.28, just as the genealogical lists of the Table of Nations in chapter 10 parallel those of 4.17-26 and 5.1-32 that follow the Creation story. In both cases the lineage of the human race is traced back to a common ancestry.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE FLOOD (vv. 5-8)

The few notices interspersed with the genealogies of chapters 4 and 5 suggest a situation of generational regression from a moral point of view. Endowed with free will, man has used God's gift to mischievous ends. The limit of divine tolerance in the face of increasing evil has been reached.

These verses are by way of theodicy; that is, the Narrator is careful to stress that the universal cataclysm into which the world is about to be plunged is not the result of blind fate or the workings of divine caprice, but the considered judgment of God made inevitable by human evil.

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Chapter 6.9-22

9 This is the line [generations—OJPS; the records—REF; chronicle—CS] of Noah.—Noah was a righteous [righteous, wholehearted—EF; blameless in his time—RA; virtuous—REF] man; he was blameless [above reproach—CS] in his age; Noah walked with God.—

10 Noah begot three sons: Shem, Kham, and Yafet.

11 The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness [violence—OJPS, REF, CS; had gone to ruin—EF; acting in a corrupt way—CS].

[NS] 9 The story of Noah and the Flood opens by making clear the election of Noah by God is not a capricious act, but the result of the man's intrinsic moral worthiness.

righteous. . . blameless These cardinal terms of biblical Hebrew, *tzadik* and *tamim*, are used here for the first time without definition, thus presupposing a clearly recognizable quality of virtue favored by God. As Ramban [Nachmanides] indicates, *tzadik* has its origin in legal terminology and implies one who is adjudged to be “in the right.” Accordingly, the term describes one whose conduct is found to be beyond reproach by the divine Judge. The term *tamim*, which is mostly found in ritual contexts, describes a sacrificial animal that is without blemish. It alone is acceptable to God. As applied to human beings, *tamim* acquired a moral dimension connoting “unblemished” by moral fault—hence, a person of unimpeachable integrity.

in his age In the face of universal corruption, he maintained civilized standards of behavior. The prophet Ezekiel (14.14, 20) refers to Noah as one of the outstandingly righteous men of antiquity. Nevertheless, as BT Sanhedrin 108a reports, some rabbinic sages read into the phrase “in his age” a hint of some qualification of his reputation; had he lived in the age of Abraham, he would have been overshadowed by the patriarch's superior character. Noah is regarded as needing a divine prop to sustain his integrity, whereas Abraham has moral autonomy. There is a measure of justification in this unfavorable comparison, for, unlike Abraham's response to the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, Noah does not plead for mercy for his contemporaries. Sensitive to this moral issue, rabbinic lore supplements the text by having Noah warn his fellow men of impending disaster and call them to repentance.

walked with God The exceptional inversion of the Hebrew word order gives God pride of place in the sentence, thus accentuating the fact that the standards by which Noah's righteousness is judged are divine, not human.

11 The earth The use of such all-inclusive terms as “the earth,” “man's wickedness” and “all flesh” in the indictment of humanity serves to justify God's actions. The totality of the evil in which the world has engulfed itself makes the totality of the catastrophe inevitable.

corrupt The key Hebrew stem sh-ch-t (ת-ח-ש) occurs seven times in the narrative.

corrupt...lawlessness The universal corruption is further defined as *chamas*. This term parallels “no justice” in Job 19.7 and is elsewhere the synonym of “falsehood,” “deceit,” or “bloodshed.” It means, in general, the flagrant subversion of the ordered processes of law. From the divine enactments for the regulation of society after the Flood, detailed in chapter 9, it may be deduced that *chamas* here refers predominantly to the arrogant disregard for the sanctity and inviolability of human life.

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman **RA:** Robert Alter **NS:** Nahum Sarna **CS:** Chaim Stern
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*⁴ **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

12 When God saw how corrupt the earth was [it had gone to ruin—EF], for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth [for the earth is filled with wrongdoing—EF],

13 God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness [violence—OJPS, REF, CS; had gone to ruin—EF] because of them: I am about to destroy them [bring ruing upon them—EF] with the earth.

14 Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

12. all flesh It is not clear whether this refers only to all humankind or whether it includes the animal kingdom as well, as in verses 17 and 19. BT Sanhedrin 108a has the idea that even the beasts had corrupted themselves through the intermating of species. From the regulation in 9.5, it would appear that the animals had become carnivorous, contrary to the implications of God’s decree in 1.20.

[EF] 12 God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to ruin: A bitter echo of 1:31, “Now God saw all that he had made,/ and here: it was exceedingly good!”

[NS] 13. God said to Noah God speaks to him directly seven times in this narrative. In the Mesopotamian tales, the decision of the gods was to have been kept secret from man. No date is given for the initial communication with Noah. From 7.11 and 4, however, it is clear Noah received the order to board the ark on the tenth day of the second month, that is, 40 days after the New Year. Because 40 is a symbolic number in the Bible, and especially so in this story, it is reasonable to conclude God was thought to have first communicated to Noah his decision about the impending fate of the world on New Year’s day.

an end Hebrew *kets* is overwhelmingly used in biblical Hebrew in a temporal context, meaning “a set term,” the completion of a fixed period of time. Hence it can connote “doom,” as in Amos 8.2 and Lamentations 4.18. *Kets* later became a key term in the vocabulary of Jewish eschatology, the doctrine of a violent and radical change in the direction of history that brings an end to one era and signals the regeneration of humanity. In this context, the *kets* stems from the unbridgeable gap between man’s willful course and God’s revealed will.

because of them They brought it on themselves. The impending catastrophe is not the product of divine caprice or nature’s blind fury.

to destroy them The Hebrew employs the same stem as for the word “corrupt.” The idea is that humankind cannot undermine the moral basis of society without endangering the very existence of its civilization. In fact, through its corruption, society sets in motion the process of inevitable self-destruction.

with the earth This is how *‘et ha-’arets* was understood by the ancient versions. Genesis Rabba 31.7 interprets that the topsoil of the earth is to be removed. This reflects the biblical idea that moral corruption physically contaminates the earth, which must be purged of its pollution.

14 Ark While nothing is left to Noah’s initiative, he himself must fashion the instrument of his own salvation. The stem a-s-h (א-ש-ע), “to make,” is featured here seven times to stress this point. The vessel, significantly, is called *tevah*. Its use emphasizes that the fate of the occupants is to be determined solely by the will of God and not to be attributed to the skill of man. By contrast, the hero of the Mesopotamian stories builds a regular ship and employs boatmen to navigate it.

[EF] Ark English as well as Hebrew etymology points to a box or chest, not strictly a boat. God, not human engineering, is the source of survival in the story.

15 This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be 300 cubits, its width 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits.

16 Make an opening for daylight in the ark [a skylight—EF, a roof—CS], and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks.

17 “For My part, I am about to bring the Flood waters [the Deluge—EF] upon the earth—to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.

18 But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives.

19 And of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female.

20 From birds of every kind, cattle of every kind, every kind of creeping thing on earth, two of each shall come to you to stay alive.

21 For your part, take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them.”

22 Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did.

[NS] 15. cubits Hebrew *ammah* literally means “forearm,” the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger of an average-sized man. The standard biblical cubit is about 18 inches. This would yield dimensions of about 450 feet in length, 75 feet in width, and 45 feet in height, giving a displacement of about 43,000 tons. Utnapishtim’s vessel is an exact cube of 120 cubits on each side, with a tonnage three or four times that of Noah’s.

16. an opening for daylight Hebrew *tsohar* is another unique word. It is either the “window” of 8.6, or it means “a roof.” Depending on which meaning is adopted, the unclear directive to “terminate it within a cubit of the top” (lit. “from above”) could variously mean that a space of one cubit is to be left between the top of the window and the roof, that the window itself is to be a cubit in height, or that the slanting roof should project one cubit beyond the side of the ark.

decks The Gilgamesh Epic reports on seven stories, each subdivided into nine sections, giving 63 compartments in all. The vessel of Atrahasis seems to have had only two decks.

17. For My part The sense is, “When you, Noah, have built the ark, I, God, will act.”

the Flood The extraordinary term *mabbul* indicates the unparalleled cataclysmic nature of the event. The definite article implies some well-known entity. The closer definition here and in 7.6, “waters upon the earth,” points to a celestial origin. This suggests that **mabbul** was a technical term denoting the heavenly or upper part of the original cosmic ocean that is now allowed to fall upon the earth.

21. of everything that is eaten Meaning the vegetarian diet prescribed in 1.29-30.

22. Noah’s unquestioning obedience and unfaltering trust in God are stressed. According to Rashi, this verse refers to the actual construction of the ark. If the calculation made in the Comment to verse 13 is correct, the ark would have taken forty days to complete.

Chapter 7

1 Then the Lord said to Noah, "Go into the ark, with all your household, for you alone have I found righteous [virtuous—REF] before Me in this generation.

2 Of every clean [ritually pure—EF] animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates, and of every animal that is not clean, two, a male and its mate;

3 of the birds of the sky also, seven pairs, male and female, to keep seed alive upon all the earth.

4 For in seven days' time I will make it rain upon the earth, 40 days and 40 nights, and I will blot out from the earth all existence that I created."

5 And Noah did just as the Lord commanded him.

6 Noah was 600 years old when the Flood came, waters upon the earth.

1. Your household The term was defined in 6.18 and is again explained in verse 7. The purpose is to contrast it with the Mesopotamian stories in which, in addition to the hero and his immediate family, his relations, craftsmen, and boatmen also enter the vessel.

for you alone It is not clear whether Noah's family is saved solely through his merit or whether they were individually righteous as well.

2. clean. . . not clean Although only animals are mentioned here, 8.20 shows that the birds too were so classified.

seven pairs The discrepancy between the instructions of 6.19-20, which speak of one pair of each species, and the requirements of the present verse is explained as follows by those who reject the idea of assigning the two passages to two different strands of tradition. 6.19-20 refers to the minimum number needed for the regeneration of the species, whereas 7.2-3 includes the additional clean animals to meet the needs of sacrifices after the Flood. As the commentator B'chor Shor notes, one would not require an equal number of males and females merely for breeding purposes.

4. in seven days' time Presumably, this is the period of time needed for the future occupants of the ark to get aboard and be properly accommodated. Seven-day periods are characteristic of this story. Two systems of recording time are employed in the Flood narrative; the one registers the interval in days between one development and another, while the other designates exact dates (see Sarna's explanation at the end of this parashah).

I will make it rain The phrase exemplifies the absolute, transcendent character of the one God, who is sovereign over all of nature. He predetermines the extent of the Flood's duration.

40 days So verses 12 and 17. Forty, a symbolic number in the Bible, is often connected with purification and the purging of sin. It undoubtedly has that significance here.

5. This refers to the boarding of the ark (cf. 6.22).

6. 600 years old Six hundred constituted a basic unit of time in the Mesopotamian tradition.

7 Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood.

8 Of the clean animals, of the animals that are not clean, of the birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground,

9 two of each, male and female, came to Noah into the ark, as God had commanded Noah.

10 And on the seventh day the waters of the Flood came upon the earth.

11 In the 600th year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the 17th day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst apart, and the floodgates of the sky broke open.

9. two of each Better, "by pairs," irrespective of the total numbers of each category, be they seven or one of each gender. The text is silent about any personal possessions taken into the ark; it concentrates on living beings. Utnapishtim is careful to take aboard silver and gold, and Atrahasis similarly loads his chattels.

11. The seven-day period mentioned in verse 4 terminated on the 17th day of the second month. Whether the New Year fell in the fall or the spring is a matter of dispute in BT Rosh Hashanah 10b-11b. According to Rabbi Eliezer, whose view coincides with that of Josephus and Targum Yonatan, the rains fell in October and November, the season of heavy precipitation in both Israel and Mesopotamia. The calendar of 8.22, which commences with seed time, also suggests an autumnal New Year. Rabbi Y'hoshua would have the Flood start in the spring, which happens to be the time when the Euphrates experiences its highest swelling and flooding, caused more by the melting of the snows in Anatolia than by the rains. In the Berossus version, the only Mesopotamian one with a precise date, the deluge began in the second month, in the spring.

fountains. . . floodgates The description of the cataclysm is incisively brief, in striking contrast to the elaborate detail given in the Gilgamesh Epic.

The "great deep" is the cosmic abyssal water of Genesis 1. The "**floodgates of the sky**" are openings in the heavens through which water from the celestial part of the cosmic ocean can escape onto the earth. In other words, creation is being undone, and the world returned to chaos. According to Rabbi Yochanan in BT Sanhedrin 108a, the use of the adjective rabbah, "great," both here and in the description of human evil in 6.5, suggests the notion of retributive justice. To put it another way, human wickedness inevitably undermines the very foundations of society, so that the pillars upon which rest the permanence of all earthly relationships totter and collapse, bringing ruin and disaster to humankind.

(12 The rain fell on the earth 40 days and 40 nights.)

13 That same day Noah and Noah's sons, Shem, Kham, and Yafet, went into the ark, with Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons—

14 they and all beasts of every kind, all cattle of every kind, all creatures of every kind that creep on the earth, and all birds of every kind, every bird, every winged thing.

15 They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was breath of life.

16 Thus they that entered comprised male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him. And the Lord shut him in.

17 The Flood continued 40 days on the earth, and the waters increased and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth.

18 The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters [went upon the face of the waters—OJPS, EF].

19 When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered.

20 Fifteen cubits higher did the waters swell, as the mountains were covered.

21 And all flesh that stirred on earth perished—birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind.

22 All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died.

23 All existence on earth was blotted out—man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

24 The waters had swelled on the earth 150 days.

16. the Lord shut him in Atrahasis and Utnapishtim shut the hatch themselves. Here the text is careful to note that the salvation of Noah is solely due to divine will.

18. drifted Literally, "it went"; that is, the vessel, having no steering gear, was entirely at the mercy of the floodwaters.

20. higher The waters crested at just about fifteen cubits above the highest peak, so that the ark was half-submerged in water just above the highest mountain.

22. All. . . of life The combination of phrases, a blend of 2.18 with 6.17, is unique and emphasizes the total nature of the catastrophe.

dry land Marine life was exempted.

23. The divine intention proclaimed in verse 4 has been wholly carried out.

24. This verse may introduce the next chapter or close the preceding. In the latter case, it would be rendered, "The waters swelled on the earth...."

150 days That is, exactly five months of thirty days each. The waters drained away so slowly and imperceptibly that they appeared to remain at their maximum height for this length of time. Tectonic subsidence would cause such a condition.

Chapter 8

1 God remembered [paid mind to—EF] Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind [rushing-wind—EF] to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.

2 The fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were stopped up, and the rain from the sky was held back;

3 the waters then receded steadily from the earth. At the end of 150 days the waters diminished,

4 so that in the seventh month, on the 17th day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

1. **God remembered** In the Bible, “remembering,” particularly on the part of God, is not the retention or recollection of a mental image, but a focusing upon the object of memory that results in action. **Noah** He is here the representative human being, like Adam, and therefore he alone is mentioned. **caused a wind to blow** As the waters are the symbol of chaos, the undoing of Creation, so the movement of the wind, Hebrew *ruach*, heralds the reimposition of order. “Wind” is the most popular rendering of *ruach* in ancient and medieval Jewish sources. As a physical phenomenon, wind conforms to the general picture of primal chaos evoked by this verse, except that, unlike darkness and water, it is not mentioned again in the Creation story. One possible explanation may be that wind reappears as the agent by means of which the water is separated—that is, blown back—as in Genesis 8.1 at the conclusion of the Flood and in Exodus 14.21 at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Wind often functions as a divine agent in the Bible. Another interpretation takes *ruach* in the sense of God’s creative, life-giving, sustaining energy. Still a third possibility lies in its use as a term heralding the arrival of God, expressing His immanence, or symbolizing His presence. The last two explanations connect the phrase with the following verse, thus alerting us to an imminent, dramatic development. God is about to transform the inert, disorganized matter, to affect it by His presence, to animate it with His spirit. The phenomena described in 7.11 are abruptly terminated, thus underscoring that everything issues from God’s sovereign will and is under His undisputed control. This is in sharp contrast to the limitations imposed upon the gods by a mythological, polytheistic system. The subservience of the gods to nature and their singular lack of freedom are vividly demonstrated in Utnapishtim’s account. Once the flood started, the gods were terror-struck at the forces they themselves had unleashed. They were appalled at the consequences of their own actions over which they no longer had control. They were “frightened by the deluge” and they “cowered like dogs crouched against the outer wall; Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail.”

4. **came to rest** Hebrew *va-tanach* is another play on the name *noach*. **on the mountains of Ararat** Not on Mount Ararat, but on the highest peak in Ararat, which is a lofty tableland mentioned in 2 Kings 19.27, Isaiah 37.38, and Jeremiah 51.27. It is known as Urartu in Assyrian inscriptions. That kingdom occupied a large portion of present-day Armenia between the River Araxes and Lake Van. The sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers lie in this region. Today there is a mountain called Ararat near the conjunction of the Turkish, Armenian and Iranian borders. Rising nearly 17,000 feet (5,185 m.) above sea level, its peak is perpetually covered with snow. In the Mesopotamian tales, the vessel also ran aground on a mountain. Utnapishtim’s boat settles on Mount Nisir, apparently the modern Pir-Omar-Gudru in southern Kurdistan. In the Berossus edition, the landing place lies in southwestern Armenia.

5 The waters went on diminishing until the 10th month; in the 10th month, on the first of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible.

6 At the end of 40 days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made

7 and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth.

8 Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters had decreased from the surface of the ground.

9 But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot, and returned to him to the ark, for there was water over all the earth. So putting out his hand, he took it into the ark with him.

10 He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark.

11 The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth.

12 He waited still another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him any more.

5. The tops of other mountains in the area became visible 73 days after the ark grounded.

6. At the end of Hebrew *kets* establishes a kind of verbal symmetry between the pronouncement of humanity's doom in 6.13 and its fulfillment, just as the 40-day interval here corresponds to the 40 days of rain.

7. the raven No reason for sending the raven is given. The Septuagint version adds here, like the Hebrew in verse 8, "to see whether the waters had abated," but this is probably an explanatory addition on its part. The raven is a wild bird that is not discriminating in its diet. It feeds on carrion as well as vegetation and could thus obtain its food from among the floating carcasses. That is why it made repeated forays from the ark. Noah could observe its movements over several days.

8. the dove From the opening words in verse 10 it may reasonably be assumed that seven days intervened between the two experiments. The dove is a gentle, timid bird. When it returned, Noah took it in his hand to see if there was clay on its feet.

11. toward evening That is, when birds customarily return to their nests. The note implies that the dove had been out all day, signifying the availability of resting places.

plucked-off The rare noun *taraf* connotes that it was freshly removed from the tree and was not flotsam, a sure sign that plant life had begun to renew itself.

olive leaf The olive tree, one of the earliest to be cultivated in the Near East, is an evergreen. It is extraordinarily sturdy and may thrive for up to a thousand years. Thus it became symbolic of God's blessings of regeneration, abundance, and strength, which is most likely the function it serves here. In the present context, the olive branch is invested with the idea of peace and reconciliation, and for this reason it was incorporated into the official emblem of the State of Israel.

13 In the 601st year, in the first month, on the first of the month, the waters began to dry from the earth; and when Noah removed the covering of the ark, he saw that the surface of the ground was drying.

14 And in the second month, on the 27th day of the month, the earth was dry.

15 God spoke to Noah, saying,

16 "Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives.

17 Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you: birds, animals, and everything that creeps on earth; and let them swarm on the earth and be fertile and increase on earth."

18 So Noah came out, together with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives.

19 Every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that stirs on earth came out of the ark by families.

20 Then Noah built an altar [a slaughter-site—EF] to the [in honor of—CS] Lord and, taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar [the slaughter-site—EF].

13-14. On New Year's day, exactly one year after God first communicated with Noah, the ground was dry, meaning that no water was visible on the surface. It took another 56 days for the earth to be in the state that it was on the third day of Creation.

15. The divine order to disembark corresponds to that for embarkation in 7.1. In the Mesopotamian stories the disembarkation is at the initiative of the hero.

17. The regeneration of animal, insect, and bird life is signaled by the repetition of the divine blessing of 1.22.

19. by families That is, species by species.

NOAH'S SACRIFICE AND GOD'S RESPONSE (vv. 20-22)

Noah now builds an altar and brings burnt offerings *on his own initiative*. His act of worship not only expresses gratitude for the safe deliverance of the ark with its living cargo, but also probably has an expiatory function: Sacrifice symbolizes the restoration of harmony between God and humanity.

20-21. burnt offerings Hebrew *'olah* is literally "that which ascends," or that which is entirely consumed by fire on the altar. This is in contradistinction to *z'vachim*, of which both priest and worshipper partake. Significantly, Noah does not offer a libation. The omission points up the fact that sacrifice is not food for God. This is important because in the Gilgamesh Epic, the destruction of mankind deprived the gods of the food and drink offerings on which they depended to sustain their immortal existence. According to that text, when "the gods smelled the sweet savor," they "crowded like flies around the sacrificer."

21 The Lord smelled the pleasing odor [inhaling the soothing fragrance—CS], and the Lord said to Himself [said in his heart—OJPS; to his heart—REF]: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind [the imagination of man’s heart—OJPS] are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done.

22 So long as the earth endures,
Seedtime and harvest,
Cold and heat,
Summer and winter,
Day and night
Shall not cease.”

21. pleasing Hebrew *nichoach* is one more play on the name *noach*.

the LORD said to Himself This statement of divine resolve is a foil to that of 6.7; there it was for destruction, here for salvation. Similarly, the present observation on the nature of man verbally echoes that of 6.5. The whole makes for an inclusion, or envelopelike structure, with the chiasmic reversal of the order signifying the antithesis to the antediluvian situation.

the devisings of man’s mind As compared with 6.5, the language is considerably modified and is no longer all-inclusive. The statement is not a judgment but an observation that a proclivity for evil is woven into the fabric of human nature. The key phrase is “from his youth,” not from birth or conception, implying that the tendency to evil may be curbed and redirected through the discipline of laws. Hence, the next section deals with the imposition of laws upon postdiluvian humanity.

Never again will I The repetition of the promise, just as in 9.11, accords it the force of a solemn oath. Such is the understanding of Isaiah 54.9. “I swore that the waters of Noah / Nevermore would flood the earth.”

22. The ordered processes of nature will never again be interrupted. The rhythm of life, reflected in the rhythmic quality of the language, is here presented through four pairs of merisms—the expression of totality by means of opposites. These describe three environmental phenomena. agricultural, climatic, and temporal. [A merism is a rhetorical term for a pair of contrasting words used to express totality or completeness.]

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 9: THE REGENERATION AND REORDERING OF SOCIETY

The destruction of the old world calls for the repopulation of the earth and the remedying of the ills that brought on the Flood. Society must henceforth rest on more secure moral foundations. New norms of human behavior must be instituted. At the same time, the haunting specter of a repetition of the cataclysm must be laid to rest, lest it have a paralyzing effect on human activity and impede all progress.

The epilogue to the Flood narrative attends to these considerations. It divides clearly into two complementary parts, logically interconnected. Verses 1-7 deal with the renewal of the world, verses 8-17 with divine assurances. A key phrase frames each part: the first, “Be fertile and increase” (vv. 1, 7); the second, “I establish a covenant” (vv. 9, 17).

The climax to the biblical Flood story affords an illuminating contrast to its Mesopotamian counterpart. The heroes of both are recipients of divine blessings, but whereas Utnapishtim and his wife are granted immortality and are removed from human society, God’s blessing to Noah and his family is socially oriented. They are not to withdraw from the world but to be fertile and to utilize the resources of nature for humanity’s benefit.

Chapter 9

1. God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.

2 The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand.

3 Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these.

4 You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it.

[NS] 1 Be fertile This injunction is in sharp conflict with the Atrahasis Epic, where the problem that precipitated the flood was overpopulation. The gods, therefore, inflict stillbirth, sterility, and spinsterhood on humanity to ensure that the problem does not recur.

[REF] 2 Do humans eat animals before this? Noah makes burnt offerings (*'olot*) after the flood, but that is a type of sacrifice that is not eaten. Abel brings a different kind of offering (*minchah*) to God, which is a type of sacrifice that is understood later in the Torah to be eaten by humans. But, prior to Genesis 9, all statements from the deity to humans concerning eating refer only to plants (1.29; 2.16; 3.18). It is therefore commonly understood that humans are not permitted to eat animals until after the flood.

[NS] 2-4. Animal flesh is henceforth permitted for food, though the privilege is not unrestricted. This concession to human weakness is not a license for savagery.

[WGP] 3 Yours to eat. Adam was restricted to a vege-tarian diet (Gen. 1 :29); Noah and his descendants are permitted the flesh of animals.

[NS] 4. with its life-blood in it Partaking of the flesh of a living animal is prohibited. It must first be slaughtered. This prohibition is known in rabbinic parlance as "*ever min ha-chai*," "a limb [cut off] from a living animal." Also implicit in the formulation is the additional prohibition on partaking of the blood that oozes out of the animal's dying body. This means the flesh may not be eaten unless the life-blood has first been drained. These laws are here made incumbent on all humanity. In rabbinic theology they, together with those of the succeeding verses, form part of what are known as the "Noachide [Noahhide] Laws."

It might be thought that the eating of blood would be so naturally repulsive as not to require legal proscription, but the history of the subject discredits such a notion. The frequency with which the prohibition is repeated in the Torah legislation testifies to the attractiveness of the practice in ancient times. Its appeal lay in the premise, explicated in Leviticus 17.11, 14 and Deuteronomy 12.23, that the blood constituted the life-essence. Consequently, popular thought had it that one could renew or reinforce one's vitality through its absorption of blood. For this reason, blood played an important role in the cults of the dead in the ancient world. In the Torah, however, precisely because blood is the symbol of life, it belongs to God alone, as does life itself.

The legislation contained in the present verse has no known analogy in the ancient Near East. It, together with Leviticus 17:13 and Deuteronomy 12:24, forms the basis of the Jewish dietary laws governing the koshering of meat, the purpose of which is to ensure the maximum extraction of blood from the flesh before cooking.

5 But for your own life-blood [bloodguilt—CS] I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man!

6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make man.

5-6. The slaughter of animals, now sanctioned, might easily become a dehumanizing experience. Also, the mass annihilation of human beings in the Flood might have tended to cheapen life in the eyes of the survivors. Accordingly, the reaffirmation of the sanctity of human life and the inviolability of the human person is singularly appropriate here.

[WGP] Your own bloodguilt Human beings are created in God's image, and their destruction requires us to restore the divine balance of existence. This restoration may be accomplished by means of beasts or by means of human beings. Thus, when an ox gores a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned (Exodus 21:28), and when one person is murdered, another death must even the balance. Verse 6 emphasizes this as an important principle in the post-diluvian world, which, by establishing a legal framework for social compliance, will be different from the antediluvian era that perished because of its violence and lawlessness.

[NS] I will require a reckoning Murder cannot be perpetrated with impunity. God Himself calls the criminal to account. Hebrew *d-r-sh* [ד-ר-ש], with God as the subject, twice repeated for emphasis, is a powerful evocative expression connoting relentless pursuit until punishment is meted out.

of every beast The killing of a human being by a beast is a disturbance of the divinely ordered structure of relationships laid down in verse 2. The act itself, like murder, constitutes the destruction of the image of God. The creature must therefore be put to death. The principles here enunciated find concrete expression in the legislation of Exodus 21:28, "When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten." of his fellow man Literally, "his brother." This reiterates the teaching of 4:10 that homicide is fratricide.

6. The first half of this verse has a poetic ring. The initial three Hebrew words, which describe the crime, are placed in exactly the reverse order to proclaim the penalty—poetic justice! In this way, the chiasmic literary form gives expression to the underlying legal principle of talion, or measure for measure. Capital punishment is here divinely sanctioned; murder cannot be recompensed by monetary restitution, as was often the case in the ancient world, as Numbers 35:31 lays down. In practice, however, the imposition of capital punishment is strongly questioned in rabbinic sources. Mishnah Makkot 1:10 states: "A Sanhedrin that executes the death penalty once in seven years is branded 'destructive.' Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah says, 'once in 70 years.' Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say, 'had we been members of the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have been put to death.' [However,] Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel says, 'They would also have multiplied murderers in Israel.'" The rabbis explored and took advantage of every mitigating factor in the laws of evidence in order to avoid a death sentence.

By man It is a human responsibility. The particle *bet* in Hebrew *ba'adam* is here taken to indicate the instrument of punishment. Human institutions, a judiciary, must be established for the purpose. This requirement seeks to correct the condition of "lawlessness" that existed prior to the Flood. The blood feud is eliminated, and murder is no longer a private affair between the killer and the family of the victim; it is a crime against society.

shall his blood be shed This biblical phrase is never used for divine action and can only mean capital punishment humanly administered.

For in His image... Murder is the supreme and capital crime because the dignity, sanctity, and inviolability of human life all derive from the fact that every human being bears the stamp of the divine Maker.

7 Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it.”

8 And God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

9 “I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come,

10 and with every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth.

11 I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

12 God further said, “This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come.

13 I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.

14 When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds,

15 I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

[NS] 9 The key term is “covenant,” Hebrew *b’rit*, which is repeated seven times. There are two divine proclamations. In verses 8-17, God’s decision is communicated to the world and is sealed for eternity by a solemn, unilateral, covenantal pledge that such a cataclysmic flood would never recur.

I now Hebrew *va-’ ani hinneni* is the same phrase used in 6.17 to introduce the original pronouncement of doom. The identity draws attention to the reassuring fact that the same Supreme Authority who executed the judgment stands behind the message of hope.

12. the sign Hebrew *’ot* is here a distinctive, visible object that immediately calls to mind a particular message.

13. My bow As Ramban [Nachmanides] points out, the rainbow is an already existing natural phenomenon that is henceforth invested with new symbolic significance as an eternal and universal testimony to God’s constancy and mercy. This conception has no parallel in biblical literature; no other celestial body is similarly endowed. Of course, being associated with rain, the rainbow naturally lends itself to the purpose, but there is more to it than this. Apart from the present passage and Ezekiel 1.28, where the rainbow is emblematic of the radiance of the Divine Presence, Hebrew *keshet* invariably means “a bow,” a frequently used weapon in ancient Near Eastern mythology. In the Tanach itself, numerous poetic texts figuratively refer to God’s bow and arrows. Against this background, the rainbow here takes on added significance as a departure from Near Eastern notions. The symbol of divine bellicosity and hostility has been transformed into a token of reconciliation between God and man.

[REF] 13 rainbow. A rabbi, Martin Lawson, once said that the rainbow symbolizes this because it is “a bow pointed away from the earth.”

[NS] 15 I will remember My covenant A superficial but instructive parallel exists with passages in Gilgamesh and Atrahasis that relate how, when the gods partook of Utnapishtim’s sacrifice, the goddess Ishtar raised her jeweled necklace and swore that she would ever be mindful of the days of the flood and never forget them. However, this oath is not accompanied by any promise or assurance about mankind’s future, and it issues from the lips of that member of the Mesopotamian pantheon most notorious for perfidy.

16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth.

17 That," God said to Noah, "shall be the sign of the covenant that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on earth."

18 The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Kham, and Yafet—Kham being the father of Canaan.

19 These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out.

20 Noah, the tiller of the soil [the husbandman—OJPS; a man of the soil—RA, CS; a man of the ground—REF], was the first to plant a vineyard.

21 He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent.

22 Kham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.

The Depravity of Canaan (vv. 18-29)

This episode is quite independent of the Flood narrative and has no counterpart in the traditions of Mesopotamia. The narrative is separated from the account of the Flood by a time lapse equivalent to the years it takes for a newly planted vine to yield its grape harvest. This span of time is clearly indicated by the fact that Noah by now has a grown grandson. Nevertheless, a sense of continuity with the foregoing is conveyed by the connectives of verses 18-19, as by the unstated but pertinent historical fact that the vine and viticulture were highly developed in the region of Armenia where the ark grounded.

The section deals with Noah as a culture hero who introduced viticulture and who fell victim to his progeny's depravity. Because the original incidents, in all their detail, were well known to the biblical audience and for reasons of delicate sensibility, only the barest outline of his downfall is reported here. The fuller account, now lost, has been truncated and condensed, resulting in the many difficulties we now find in the narrative. For instance, we are not certain if Kham is guilty solely of voyeurism or if the description of his offense in verse 22 is a euphemism for some act of gross indecency; we are not told why Noah curses Canaan rather than Kham. Yafet's alliance with Shem and the threefold emphasis on Kham's paternity of Canaan and on the curse of servitude imposed on his son are obviously elements of critical importance to the Narrator that require clarification.

The section closes with the death of Noah. This event opens a second 10-generation epoch in the Torah's scheme of human history, in the course of which nations come into existence. The portrayal of political relationships in terms of genealogies is a well recognized and recurring feature of the Book of Genesis. The filial relationship of Canaan to Kham in our story must be considered against this background. In 10.6, both Egypt and Canaan are among the sons of Kham. In Psalms 78.51, Egypt is termed "the tents of Kham," and in Psalms 105.23, 27 and 106.22, Egypt is again identified with Kham. In other words, Kham in this chapter is most likely symbolic of Egypt, and Canaan, as Kham's "son," would be figurative for Egyptian suzerainty over the land of Canaan. This relationship was a historical reality in the 18th and 19th Egyptian Dynasties (ca. 1552-ca. 1200 B.C.E.).

The association of Canaan with Egypt finds expression elsewhere in the Tanach on a different level. Leviticus 18.3 reads, "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you." Then follows an inventory of sexual abominations,

because of which, the chapter concludes, the Canaanites are expelled from their land. The same sentiment is repeated in Leviticus 20.23 after another list of the depraved practices of the Canaanites. The identical theme underlies several episodes in Genesis. Pharaoh's kidnapping of Sarai in Egypt; Avimelech's dealings with her and with Rebekah in Canaan; the sexual perversions of the Sodomites; Dinah's experience in Shechem; the offenses of Er and Onan, sons of Judah's Canaanite wife; and, finally, the attempted seduction of Joseph in Egypt by Potiphar's wife. There can be no doubt that a major function of our present narrative is to introduce the theme of the depravity of the Canaanites.

The role of Yafet, who acts in concert with Shem, and to whom the Canaanites too are to be subjugated, also points to the political-historical level of the narrative. According to the genealogy of Yafet in 10.2-4, he becomes the ancestor of tribes and peoples associated with Anatolia and the Aegean. This suggests that behind the text is some historical situation that resulted in the Canaanites becoming subjected both to the Yafetites and to the descendants of Shem. The most plausible theory links the present narrative with the events connected with the invasions by the sea peoples of the east Mediterranean littoral. These peoples first attacked Egypt ca. 1220 B.C.E., during the reign of Merneptah, and then again in 1175 B.C.E., during the reign of Rameses III. It was as a result of these invasions that the Philistines and others from the Aegean area arrived and settled on the coast of Canaan. This happened about the same time that the Israelites were invading Canaan from the east. The Canaanites found themselves assailed from east and west, and their civilization, in the region that was to become the Land of Israel, totally collapsed.

Such, most likely, are the historical circumstances to which the narrative points. However, there is also a didactic level on which it must be understood. Central to the events described are the fundamental biblical teachings that human history is under the continual direction of God and that the fate of peoples is inseparably bound up with their moral state.

The phrase "**tiller of the soil**," a designation of Noah, implies something well known about him, which links up with 5.29, in which Noah is seen as relieving the world of the curse of the ground imposed on Adam. As "**the first to plant a vineyard**," he is the initiator of orchard husbandry. The next verse implies that Noah was involved not just in viticulture, the science and art of grape-growing, but also in viniculture, the specific cultivation of grapes for wine-making. Here again, as in 4.17-22, advances in the arts of civilization are purely human achievements, not the work of gods or demigods as they generally are in the ancient world. Thus, the Egyptians ascribed the original cultivation of the vine to Osiris; the Greeks, to Dionysus. It should be noted that, in verse 21, no blame attaches to Noah since he was oblivious to the intoxicating effects of his discovery.

The present story also constitutes another departure from Near Eastern tradition in assigning the origin of wine to postdiluvian times. Utnapishtim is said to have given the beverage to the builders of his vessel before the flood.

As to stating that "**he uncovered himself**," Habakkuk 2.15 and Lamentations 4.21 also mention exposure of nakedness by the inebriated. The act is associated with shame and with loss of human dignity, as Genesis 3.7, 21 make clear. Also we are told this was "within his tent, meaning in the privacy of his dwelling, not in public. This makes Kham's behavior all the more contemptible.

Finally, although the cultivation of the vine implies a settled, nonnomadic community, Noah and his sons still reside in tents. The transition from nomadism to sedentary life is thereby indicated.

Regarding verse 22, the earliest postbiblical traditions take this verse literally, and the final clause of verse 23 would seem to support it. Kham compounded his lack of filial respect by leaving his father uncovered and by shamelessly bruiting it about. On the other hand, the verbs of verse 24 and the severity of Noah's reaction suggest the Torah suppressed the sordid details of some repugnant act. Rabbinic sources are divided on whether Kham castrated his father or committed sodomy. The former interpretation might be supported by the fact that Noah has no children after the Flood.

23 But Shem and Yafet took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness.

24 When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him,

25 he said,

"Cursed be Canaan;/
The lowest of slaves/
Shall he be to his brothers."

26 And he said, /

"Blessed be the Lord,
The God of Shem;/
Let Canaan be a slave to them. /

27 May God enlarge Yafet, /

And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;/
And let Canaan be a slave to them."

28 Noah lived after the Flood 350 years.

29 And all the days of Noah came to 950 years; then he died.

23. so that they did not see their father's nakedness The Hebrew word order is the reverse of that Kham's behavior in verse 22. The chiasm points up the contrast between their conduct and his.

24. woke up from his wine That is, when he had sobered up.

learned what. . . had done to him Shem and Yafet must have reported the facts, whatever they were, to their father.

[WGP] learned The Hebrew verb has both an intellectual/experiential and sexual meaning; in Genesis 4.1 it is the word for sexual intercourse.

[NS] his youngest son This description implies a tradition that makes Kham the youngest despite the five-times repeated sequence. Shem, Kham, Yafet. Ramban points to Genesis 25.9 and Joshua 24.4 as proof that the order of listing need not always reflect the order of birth. In 10.21, the text explicitly states that Shem is the elder brother of Yafet.

[WGP] His youngest son Kham is here called the youngest. Critics see two separate traditions here. Older commentators took "youngest" to mean "unworthy."

25. **Canaan** The text is silent as to why Canaan, not Kham, is cursed. A reasonable assumption would be that in the fuller story Canaan, son of Kham, was a participant in the offense against Noah, a detail omitted here on grounds of delicacy and on the assumption that the original story was well known to the reader.

The lowest of slaves Literally, "a slave of slaves." This construction expresses the extreme degree. B'chor Shor notes that implicit in the pronouncement of the subjugation of Canaan (כבוען), repeated three times for emphasis, is a word play on the name, connecting it with the stem k-n-ע' (כ-נ-ע), "to be humbled, to humiliate oneself."

[WGP] slave Advocates of the black man's slavery used to cite this text for support, but this passage, as verse 26 makes clear, deals with political subjection and has nothing whatsoever to do with race.

The Table of Nations

The preceding chapter noted that after the Flood “the whole world branched out” from the three sons of Noah. The geographic horizon of this roster of peoples roughly encompasses the vast territory that stretches from the Caucasus in the north to Arabia in the south, from the Iranian plateau in the east to the island of Crete, and perhaps beyond, in the west—all from the perspective of one centered in Canaan, the future Land of Israel, which is where three geographic arcs intersect.

The Nature of the Table. On the surface, the use of verbs expressing birth and of terms like “son,” “father,” “first-born” suggest straightforward genealogies of the kind already encountered in previous chapters. In fact, these recapitulations disclose that the terminology is not meant to be taken literally but, rather, in the same figurative way that one speaks of a “fatherland” and “mother country.” Many of the personal names listed here are otherwise known as places or peoples. Ten names have plural endings, nine others take the gentilic adjectival suffix -i, which indicates ethnic affiliation, and they also have the definite article, inadmissible with personal names in Hebrew.

In the ancient world, kinship terms were often employed to describe treaty relationships. The same kind of familial terminology is used in connection with the phenomenon of the “eponymous ancestor”— the explanation of the name of a city or a people deriving from a personage of antiquity who is said to have been its progenitor. The ancient Greeks, who were known as Hellenes, provide an excellent illustration of this process. Hellen was said to have been the son of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the survivors of the flood. His three sons were Dorus, Aeolus, and Xuthus. The first two were supposed to have been, respectively, the ancestors of two of the four major subdivisions of the Hellenes, the Dorians and Aeolians; the third fathered Ion and Achaeus, from whom sprang the Ionians and Achaeans. Similar familial ethnographic usage is attested at Ugarit.

In the Tanach, too, a pedigree is often the literary form through which ethnic origins and political and other relationships are described. The genealogical register provides a convenient way of schematizing these relationships. Ishmael is prenatally destined to become the “father” of 12 chieftains; however, when the names are listed in 25:16 “in the order of their birth” it is clear that one is dealing with the constituents of a confederation of Arab tribes. The present chapter shows the same literary process at work and indicates the diverse and composite nature of its materials.

The Table of Nations also is sprinkled with various tidbits of information, such as fragmentary biographical details about a certain Nimrod, a list of Mesopotamian cities, the boundaries of Canaan, the YJoktanite settlement, and a reference to a major event in the days of Peleg.

Its Problems. The Table itself is riddled with difficulties, many of which remain as yet insoluble. It defies the consistent application of any single criterion of selectivity or of principles of classification, apart from the very general and rudimentary distribution according to the three broad groupings. Racial characteristics, physical types, or skin color play no role in the categorizing, nor is language a guideline (Canaan, recognized in Isaiah 19:18 to have the same tongue as Israel, is affiliated with Egypt among the Khamites, while the Elamites, who spoke a non-Semitic language, are classified under Shem). A special problem is the listing of Sheba and Havilah under both Kham and Shem, and the subsuming of Mesopotamian, Ethiopian and Arabian entities all under Cush, a Khamite.

The Seventy Peoples. The peoples listed amount precisely to 70, excluding Nimrod, who is an individual. The mere recognition in verse 5 of the existence of additional, unnamed “maritime nations” lends added significance to the enumeration as being deliberately chosen.

In the biblical world, the number 70 is “typological”; that is, it is used for rhetorical effect to evoke the idea of totality, of comprehensiveness on a large scale, as opposed to the use of seven on a smaller scale. Thus, according to Genesis 46:27, the entire household of Jacob that went down to Egypt comprised 70 souls. The representative body of the entire community of Israel in the wilderness consisted of 70 elders, as recorded in Exodus 24:9 and Numbers 11:24; and the prophet Ezekiel, in 8:11, uses the same figure at the end of the period of the monarchy.

In the mythology of Canaan, as expressed in Ugaritic literature, the pantheon comprised 70 members, who are said to have been the sons of the supreme god El and the mother goddess Ashirat.

The same device is employed in rabbinic literature, where the phrases “70 peoples” or “70 languages” express humanity in its entirety. This device affords an insight into a major function of the Table, a document thus far unparalleled in the ancient world. This strangely perplexing miscellany of peoples, tribes and places is no mere academic or scholastic exercise. *It affirms, first of all, the common origin and absolute unity of humankind after the Flood; then it tacitly, but effectively, asserts that the varied instrumentalities of human divisiveness are all secondary to the essential unity of the international community, which truly constitutes a family of man.* [Emphasis Shammai’s]

This conviction, incidentally, is strikingly inconsistent with the particularistic fancies of the ancient Egyptians, who exclusively reserved for themselves the designation “men,” while regarding all other peoples as descended from the enemies of the gods. Of course, the universalistic approach of the Table of Nations proceeds naturally from the monotheistic Creation narratives of Genesis. God’s sovereignty extends to every nation; His providence governs them all.

The Prominence of the Shemites. While the preceding episode about Noah, Kham, and Canaan contains an intimation of future developments, the present chapter carries forward this foreshadowing in several subtle ways. The genealogies pointedly reverse the order of Noah’s sons, even though the sequence Shem-Kham-Yafet has already appeared in 5.32, 6.10, 9.18, and here in 10.1. This inversion serves to dispose of those branches of humanity whose religious history becomes static and sterile from the monotheistic standpoint of the Narrator. This strategy enables the text to direct attention climactically to the line of descent that eventually leads to the spiritually dynamic Abraham. The Narrator used the identical technique in shifting the focus from the spiritually sterile line of Cain in 4.17-25, to the divinely favored Seth in chapter 5. In the same way, 25.12-18 will detail the line of Ishmael in order to make way for the story of Isaac, and chapter 36 will dispose of Esau’s genealogies so that the biography of Jacob and his progeny may resume without interruption.

Another pointer to a major function of the Table is the use of exceptional, double prefatory formulas in verses 21-22 to introduce Shem’s line, a sure indication of his importance to the Narrator and another proof that the entire document is deliberately structured so as to project Shem and one line of his offspring into prominence. Moreover, while the genealogies of Yafet and Kham continue for only three generations each, that of Shem extends to the sixth generation. Here again, Aram is disposed of first, then one line is selected in chapter 11, and it continues for a total of 10 generations that reach to Abraham.

Israel and the Nations. This brings us back to the number 70, which is not only emblematic of the totality of the human race but may also function to intensify the general prefiguring thrust of the Table. The number 70 resonates with the composition of the offspring of Jacob who went down to Egypt. The special significance this assumes is demonstrated not only by its emphasis in Genesis 46.27, but also by its reiteration twice more, in Exodus 1.5 and Deuteronomy 10.22. It is as though the totality of the nations and the totality of the Israelites who migrate to Egypt are intertwined.

The fundamental biblical theme of Israel and the international community is delicately insinuated into the text. It is not coincidental that God’s first communication to the patriarch Abraham immediately places his offspring in a worldwide context. “All the families of the earth / shall bless themselves by you.” This same universal frame of reference recurs in subsequent reiterations of the divine blessing to Abraham, as well as to Isaac and Jacob. It finds its first expression, albeit by artful insinuation, in the present chapter.

Chapter 10

- 1 These are the lines [generations—OJPS; lineage—RA; records—REF] of Shem, Kham, and Yafet, the sons of Noah: sons were born to them after the Flood.
- 2 The descendants of Yafet: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Yavan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.
- 3 The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah.
- 4 The descendants of Yavan: Elishah and Tarshish, the Kittim and the Dodanim.
- 5 From these the maritime nations branched out. [These are the descendants of Yafet] by their lands—each with its language—their clans and their nations.
- 6 The descendants of Kham: Cush, Mitzraim, Put, and Canaan.
- 7 The descendants of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.
- 8 Cush also begot Nimrod, who was the first man of might on earth.
- 9 He was a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord; hence the saying, “Like Nimrod a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord.”
- 10 The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh in the land of Shinar.
- 11 From that land Ashur went forth and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah,
- 12 and Resen between Nineveh and Calah, that is the great city.
- 13 And Mitzraim begot the Ludim, the Anamim, the Lehabim, the Naphtuhim,
- 14 the Pathrusim, the Casluhim, and the Caphtorim, whence the Philistines came forth.
- 15 Canaan begot Sidon, his first-born, and Heth;

[NS] 8. Nimrod This outstanding personality, whose exploits obviously left their mark on the historical memory of Israel, has not been positively identified with any known individual in the ancient world. Micah 5.5 echoes the traditions behind these verses. The site of the ancient city of Calah, mentioned in verse 11, is presently known locally as Birs Nimrud. Attempts have been made to associate him with Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon I of Akkad, who dominated a great portion of the Near East for about 50 years during the last quarter of the third millennium B.C.E. He was the first to use the title “King of the Four Quarters of the World,” and another of his titles was “Strong Male,” which recalls the “man of might” here in verse 8. His achievements were widely commemorated on steles, buildings, and votive inscriptions, and he was the subject of numerous tales and legends. One persistent tradition holds that he came to a grievous end for defying the gods. In this connection, the Hebrew name Nimrod may be a play on the name Naram-Sin in that it evokes the verb *m-r-d* (מ-ר-ד), “to rebel.” This interpretation of the name as “rebel” is found in BT Eruvin 53a The Tower of Babel (vv. 19)

16 and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites,

17 the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites,

18 the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites. Afterward the clans of the Canaanites spread out.

19 The [original] Canaanite territory extended from Sidon as far as Gerar, near Gaza, and as far as Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, near Lasha.

20 These are the descendants of Kham, according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations.

21 Sons were also born to Shem, ancestor of all the descendants of Eber and older brother of Yafet.

22 The descendants of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram.

23 The descendants of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash.

24 Arpachshad begot Shelah, and Shelah begot Eber.

25 Two sons were born to Eber: the name of the first was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided;e and the name of his brother was Yoktan.

26 Yoktan begot Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah,

27 Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah,

28 Obal, Abimael, Sheba,

29 Ophir, Havilah, and Yobab; all these were the descendants of Yoktan.

30 Their settlements extended from Mesha as far as Sephar, the hill country to the east.

31 These are the descendants of Shem according to their clans and languages, by their lands, according to their nations.

32 These are the groupings of Noah's descendants [the families of Noah's children—REF; the clan-groupings of the Sons of Noah—RA], according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood.

Chapter 11

1 Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words.

2 And as they migrated [wandered—CS] from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard."—Brick served them as stone [like building stone—RA], and bitumen served them as mortar [red mortar—RA].—

4 And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world."

5 The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built,

6 and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.

7 Let us, then, go down and confound their speech [let us go down and baffle their language—RA; let's go down and babble their language—REF] there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."

8 Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city.

9 That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth [for there the LORD made the language of all the earth babble—RA; let's go down and babble their language—REF]; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The Tower of Babel

The preceding Table of Nations repeatedly called attention to the distinguishing forms of human variation—ethnic, linguistic, and territorial. The first is probably taken to be a natural outgrowth of the ramified lines of descent from Noah's three sons. The last is easily explained as a normal development of the geographic dispersal imposed by God on man. But the biblical Narrator is disturbed by the vast diversity of languages that characterizes the human race. Given the Torah's presupposition that all mankind constitutes one great family traceable to a common ancestry, it becomes necessary to account for the rise of a polyglot humanity. The present narrative deals with this development. Conscious of the misunderstandings, discord and strife that result from the disruption of communication between human beings, it looks upon the lack of a common language as a calamity that humankind has brought upon itself in consequence of its overweening pride and deliberate defiance of God's will.

Though the story of the Tower of Babel has no parallel or prototype in Mesopotamian literature, it does display an intimate acquaintance with Babylonian construction techniques, a familiarity with some characteristic formulas of cuneiform royal building inscriptions, and a knowledge of certain Mesopotamian traditions. As a matter of fact, it seems to be a deliberate expression of ideas that are in antipodal opposition to some cherished notions of ancient Mesopotamia.

This episode does not contain the names of individuals. A key expression, repeated five times, is "all the earth," for the entire human race is presumed to be sinful. The postdiluvian generations, having learned nothing from history, have proved themselves to be disappointingly out of harmony with God. God must start again, as it were, in a fresh attempt to have His purposes on earth fulfilled. That is the reason why the present narrative, which closes the second universal epoch in human history, is immediately followed by a genealogy that issues in Abraham. From Shem to Abraham.

- 10 This is the line of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the Flood.
- 11 After the birth of Arpachshad, Shem lived 500 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 12 When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he begot Shelah.
- 13 After the birth of Shelah, Arpachshad lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 14 When Shelah had lived 30 years, he begot Eber.
- 15 After the birth of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 16 When Eber had lived 34 years, he begot Peleg.
- 17 After the birth of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 18 When Peleg had lived 30 years, he begot Reu.
- 19 After the birth of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 20 When Reu had lived 32 years, he begot Serug.
- 21 After the birth of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and begot sons and daughters.
- 22 When Serug had lived 30 years, he begot Nahor.

Transition to the Patriarchs

The focus of the biblical narration decisively narrows now to concentrate upon one particular line of descent within the family tree of Shem. This line issues in Abraham, who is the tenth generation from Shem, just as Noah was the tenth generation from Adam. From the scriptural point of view, the birth of Abraham constitutes a turning point in human history.

The present genealogy is closely related to that of chapter 5, which recounts the generations from Adam to Noah. Both genealogies give the age of the father at the birth of his first-born son, the number of years the father lived thereafter, and a formulaic statement that he begot sons and daughters. Also, both lists close with a notable who had three sons.

Unlike chapter 5, this chapter omits the summary total of the respective life spans as well as the note about each one's death. The pervasive, if unarticulated, air of pessimism about the seemingly incorrigible nature of man that rises from the preceding narratives is now relieved by the emphasis on life, on a new birth, on the orderly sequence of the generations, on the possibility of a fresh start for humanity. At the same time, there is a considerable diminution in the human life span as compared with the antediluvians, and procreation now begins at a much younger age than before. For the sake of completeness, the list of the initial five generations from Shem to Peleg is repeated from 10.21-25. Thereafter, a further drastic reduction in the duration of life occurs.

The advent of Terah is a climactic event that is set off by the *eleh tol'dot* formula, which also serves to establish the transition from universal to patriarchal history. The text mentions Terah's three sons because the posterity of each is to be connected with the fortunes of Abraham and his offspring. One intriguing aspect of the genealogy is that some of its names are those of places in the northwestern part of Upper Mesopotamia, the region with which the patriarchs of Israel continued to maintain associations long after Abraham's migration to Canaan.

23 After the birth of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and begot sons and daughters.

24 When Nahor had lived 29 years, he begot Terah.

25 After the birth of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and begot sons and daughters.

26 When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

27 Now this is the line [chronicle—CS; begettings—RA] of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot.

28 Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans.

29 Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

30 Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Charan, they settled there.

32 The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Charan.

29 Sarai The name, changed to Sarah in 17.15, means “princess” in Hebrew but “queen” if based on Akkadian *sharratu*, a term used for the female consort of the moon-god Sin, Ur's principal god. Though the parentage of Nahor's wife is given, that of Sarai is not. This omission is so extraordinary that it must be intentional. The Narrator withholds information so as not to ruin the suspense in chapter 20 when Abraham, to extricate himself from an embarrassing predicament, reveals that Sarai is his half-sister.

Milcah The name, as vocalized, is a variant form of Malcah, “queen.” Akkadian *malkatu* is a title of the goddess Ishtar, who was known as “Queen of Heaven,” daughter of the moon-god Sin. Nahor married his niece, the orphaned daughter of his departed brother Haran. The granddaughter of this marriage was Rebekah, Isaac's wife. This is another example of the narrative technique of introducing information into the text with an eye to later developments.

Iscah The name may derive from the stem meaning “to see,” and be a shortened form of a sentence name, “May God see (that is, with favor) the child.” There is no information about her. She may have been the central figure of some traditions that are now lost. Ancient lore makes her identical with Sarai, but this would contradict the data of 20.12 since she would then be Abraham's niece, not his half-sister.

30 Sarai is said to be barren, but Milcah is not so described even though she too has no children. Undoubtedly, this note is preparatory to chapter 12. It points up the striking contrast between the impending divine promises to Abraham of abundant posterity and the harsh reality that tries his faith. A deliberate act of divine Providence terminates the prolonged state of childlessness. The resulting offspring is predestined to be the instrument of God's purposes. This theme recurs in connection with the matriarchs Rebekah and Rachel and, later, with the mothers of Samson and Samuel.