

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 6-8

Everett Fox

Antiquity and the Preparation for the Flood (6:1-8): The final pre-Flood section of the text includes a theme common to other ancient tales: the biological mixing of gods and men in dim antiquity. Perhaps this fragment, which initially seems difficult to reconcile with biblical ideas about God, has been retained here to round out a picture familiar to ancient readers, and to recall the early closeness of the divine and the human which, according to many cultures, later dissolved. It is also possible that the episode serves as another example of a world that has become disordered, thus providing further justification for a divinely ordered destruction.

The stage is set for the Flood by means of a powerful sound reference. In 5:29, Noah was named, ostensibly to comfort his elders' "sorrow" over human "pains" in tilling the soil [*נחמנו*—*zeh y'na-cha-meh-nu*; "this one will provide us relief"]. Here (6:6), however, the meaning of the name has been ironically reversed. The one who was supposed to bring comfort only heralds God's own being "sorry" and "pained" (vv. 6-7) [*כי נחמתי וינחם... va-yi-na-chem... ki ni-cham-ti*; he regretted...because I regret]. A similar ironic wordplay, where the audience knows what the name-bestower does not, occurs in Exodus 2:10; curiously, the hero of that passage, the baby Moses, is also connected with an "ark" the term for the little basket in which he is set adrift.¹

6:3 a hundred and twenty years: Some early interpreters take this to specify a "grace period" for humanity before the Flood. The text seems to be setting the limits of the human life span.

6:5 now YHWH saw ... evildoing: In contrast to the refrain of Chapter 1, "God saw that it was good."

every form of their heart's planning: This lengthy phrase indicates human imagination (Speiser: "every scheme that his mind devised").

"Heart" (Heb. *lev* or *levav*) often expresses the concept of "mind" in the Bible.

The Deluge (6:9-8:19): The biblical account of the Flood is replete with echoes and allusions which point to three clear motifs: God's justice, the totality of punishment, and a new beginning patterned after Genesis 1.

The first of these is brought out in 6:11-13: the repetition of the word "ruin" indicates not only the sorry state of society but also the principle of just retaliation, for God is to "bring ruin" upon the earth (v 13).

The totality of the disaster is conveyed by the repeated use of the word "all" in 7:21-23, as well as by the completeness of the list of those destroyed (7:21-23). Humans, as befits their place in the order of creation, appear last, but actually it is they who drag virtually all of creation down with them. This reflects a deeply held biblical idea that human action directly affects the orderly and otherwise neutral functioning of nature.

There are striking parallels between the Flood narrative and the creation account of Chapter 1. Just as the animals were created, each "according to its kind," their rescue, both in boarding and leaving the Ark, is similarly worded. "Ocean" and the great "rushing-wind" which existed at creation (1:2) return here, the former to signify a lapse into chaos and the latter, the restoration of order and peace (7:11, 8:1). Finally, after the Flood (9:1-3) Noah is blessed in wording that

¹ The princess thinks the name "Moshe" memorializes her "drawing out" the baby from the Nile. However, as Martin Buber and others have noted, the verb form in Moshe is active, not passive. It is the baby who will do the drawing out. — Shammai

recalls Adam's blessing in 1:28-30. The world thus begins anew, with the implication of some hope for the future.

Repetition emphasizes other aspects of the story's message. In general, the word-stem "live" occurs constantly throughout the text, highlighting the rescue and renewal of life, as well as its destruction. Noah's obedience, another major theme, is indicated by variations on the phrase "according to all that God commanded him, so he did" (6:22). Of rhythmical, almost ritual-sounding import is the phrase "you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives."

Our story has often been compared, with much justification, to the several Mesopotamian Flood accounts (e.g., in the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics), with which it shares a great deal of detail. At one time scholars were quick to concentrate on the parallels, but the differences are now recognized as being much more significant. In general one may say that in contrast to the earlier (Mesopotamian) versions, the biblical one is unambiguous in both tone and intent. It has been placed in Genesis to exemplify a God who judges the world according to human behavior, punishes evil and rescues the righteous. This is a far cry from the earlier accounts, where the gods plan the destruction of the world for reasons that are unclear (or in one version, because humankind's noise is disturbing the sleep of the gods), and where the protagonist, Utnapishtim, is saved as the result of a god's favoritism, without any moral judgments being passed.

6:12 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!"

6:14 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.

reeds: Reading Heb. *kanim* for traditional text's *kinnim* ("compartments").

7:17-20 increased...swelled and increased exceedingly...swelled exceedingly, yes, exceedingly...swelled: The structure here mirrors the action: the surging and growing of the waters.

8:3,5 advancing and returning...advance and diminish: Again, as in 7:17-20, the motion of the waters is suggested by means of sound.

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 6-8

W. Gunther Plaut

6:2] Divine beings (b'nei ha-elohim). This passage is likely a mythic fragment. Others translate as "the sons of God." Hurrian, Phoenician, and Greek myths told of Titans, supermen of great stature and strength, who were supposedly the offspring of unions between gods and mortal women.

There are many interpretations of this strange fragment. One old understanding was that these were angels, perhaps fallen ones. Another view holds that the text in Gen. 6:2 records an angelic sin and that Psalm 82:1, 6, 7 are references to this incident [37]. Cassuto denies this, and Bamberger states that "it is not so much survival of mythology as a reply to it. It is not a fragment: the biblical author disposes of a distasteful subject as quickly as he can." Still another interpretation takes "divine beings" to refer to the descendants of Seth and takes "human daughters" to refer to the descendants of Cain. The phrase has also been taken as recording interclass marital unions: sons of the aristocracy married daughters of the common folk.

Why was this passage retained in the text? Possibly because it served as an introduction to the Flood story and as such appeared to say: Humans became giants, achieved renown in their time, and were heroes in their own eyes. But God, evaluating their development, looked at neither size nor reputation but at the heart, and found its devices evil. Hence, God resolved to make a new start with Noah.

6:7] [And with them] the beasts. Animals are included in the impending destruction because, according to the biblical view, they existed for the sake of humanity. According to Rashi, what use would there be for animals if human beings ceased to exist?

THE FLOOD (6:9-8:14) Many diverse cultures tell stories about a great flood. It has been suggested that these recall an earthwide catastrophe brought on either by a terrestrial eruption or by a celestial collision, which may have resulted in a rise of sea levels sufficient to cover all continents. Recent scientific investigations have shown that, at some time near the transition between prehistory and history, floodwaters from the Persian Gulf may have covered the southern section of the Mesopotamian Valley.

But the biblical account is far more than prehistoric memory or a variant of ancient folk legends; it is above all a story with a moral. Its themes are sin, righteousness, and humankind's second opportunity to live in accordance with, rather than opposed to, the will of God....

In the Bible, it is human sin that causes the Flood; in the Babylonian-Akkadian epic of Atrahasis, human boisterousness and noise disturb the sleep of the gods and cause them to react. In the Bible, Noah is saved so that he might begin the human voyage over again; in Gilgamesh, the flood hero is elevated to immortal status and thereby is removed from human history. Most important, in the Torah, God institutes law as the counteragent of human wickedness, while in other Near Eastern traditions such a divine response is absent.

Chapter 6

CELESTIAL-TERRESTRIAL INTERMARRIAGE (vv. 1-4)

At the beginning of history, humans strove to rise to the level of divine beings, and God intervened. Humankind cannot be immortal. Here divine beings lower themselves to the level of humans, and God intervenes. A severe limitation on human longevity results.

The account given in these few verses is surely the strangest of all the Genesis narratives. It is so full of difficulties as to defy certainty of interpretation. The perplexities arise from the theme of the story, from its apparent intrusiveness within the larger narrative, from its extreme terseness, and from some of its vocabulary and syntax. The passage cannot be other than a fragment of what was once a well-known and fuller story, now etched in the barest outline.

Legends about intercourse between gods and mortal women and between goddesses and men, resulting in the generation of demigods, are widespread and familiar ingredients of pagan mythology. The present theme of celestial beings arriving on earth and intermarrying with humans seems at first glance to belong to the same genre, echoes of which are found in other biblical passages. Thus, behind the exclamation of Isaiah 14:12—"How are you fallen from heaven, / O Shining One, son of Dawn! / How are you felled to earth"—is the notion of angels in rebellion against God and thereby forfeiting their angelic dignity. Job 4:18-19 similarly expresses the theme of the corruptibility of angels: "If He cannot trust His own servants, / And casts reproach on His angels, / How much less those who dwell in houses of clay."

In light of these and other biblical references, such as Ezekiel 32:27, it is quite likely that the main function of the present highly condensed version of the original story is to combat polytheistic mythology. The picture here presented of celestial beings intermarrying with women on earth may partake of the mythical, but it does not overstep the bounds of monotheism; there is only one God who passes judgment and makes decisions. The offspring of such unnatural union may have possessed heroic stature, but they have no divine qualities; they are flesh and blood like all humans. They are not only mortal, but their life span is severely limited as compared with the personages listed in chapter 5. The one God is recognized as holding sole title to the breath of life, which He controls as He wills.

This literary segment has three points of connection with the preceding passage: the opening reference to human fecundity in verse 1 takes up the theme implicit in the genealogy; mention of daughters links up with the oft-repeated formula there regarding the begetting of sons and daughters; and the specific restriction of human longevity presupposes knowledge of the extraordinary ages recorded in chapter 5.

At the same time, the story is immediately followed by God's verdict on human wickedness, and the impression is created, even if not made explicit, that it illustrates the magnitude and the universality of evil in the world. Even the celestial host is corrupted. True, mankind is not condemned here for the acts of angels, but the effect is that the world order has been disturbed.

1. men Hebrew *ha-'adam* is here a collective, the human race.

2. the divine beings The definite article points to a familiar and well-understood term. The context in Job 1:6; 2:1; and 38:7 unmistakably proves the reference to be to the angelic host, the celestial entourage of God. This is a poetic image drawn from the analogy of human kings surrounded by their assemblage of courtiers. Occasionally, as in 1 Kings 22:19, "the host of heaven" is used to the same effect.

saw how beautiful The implication is that they were driven by lust, so that external beauty, and not character, was their sole criterion in the selection of mates.

took wives Hebrew *l-k-ch 'ishah* is the regular term for the marriage relationship. There is no suggestion here of violent possession or any condemnation of the women involved.

3. The LORD said See Comment to 3:22.

My breath The life force that issues from God, corresponding to “the breath of life” in 2:7. Its presence or withdrawal determines life and death.

shall not abide This rendering of the otherwise unexampled Hebrew *yadon* best suits the context and follows the Septuagint, the Vulgate, Saadia, and Ramban. However, Rashi, Rashbam, Bekhor Shor, and Ibn Ezra connect the word with the stem *d-y-n*, “to judge.” The meaning here would then be something like, “I shall go on suspending judgment.”

in man Taken together with the next clause, the reference would be specifically to the offspring of these unnatural unions, but all humankind is included within the scope of the verdict because disorder has been introduced into God’s creation.

flesh They are not divine despite their nonhuman paternity. “Flesh” connotes human frailty. Psalms 56:5 and Isaiah 31:3 are good examples of this usage.

one hundred and twenty years The duration of human life is drastically shortened, the diminution being emblematic of moral and spiritual degeneration. Early exegesis of this verse prefers to see here a reference to the interval of time remaining before the Flood. The figure would then represent three conventional generations of forty years each.

4. This verse is obscure, probably deliberately so, in order to downgrade the mythic tone. The etymology of Nephilim is uncertain. The obvious association with *n-f-l* yields the rendering “fallen ones,” that is, fallen angels. But it is not clear from the text that the Nephilim are identical with the “divine beings.” Rather, they appear to be the offspring of the misalliances, who continued to generate Nephilim in the course of their married lives. Because Numbers 13:33 implies that these were people of extraordinary physical stature, the term was understood to mean “giants” or “heroes.” While it is not certain from the text whether or not the Nephilim themselves procreated, it is contrary to the understanding of the biblical narrative that they should have survived the Flood. Hence, the reference in Numbers is not to the supposedly continued existence of Nephilim into Israelite times; rather, it is used simply for oratorical effect, much as “Huns” was used to designate Germans during the two world wars.

cohabited Significantly, the verb *y-d-* is not used, as in 4:1, 17, and 25, but a coarser term, as befits the circumstances.

heroes of old, the men of renown Their heroic exploits were the subject of many a popular tale. On the analogy of 11:4, it is possible that they were guilty of some vainglorious outrages.

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.

5. The LORD saw This phrase has juridical overtones, implying both investigation of the facts and readiness for action.

how great The use of the same Hebrew stem here as in verse 1 suggests that the measure of evil grows in proportion to the growth in population.

every plan devised by his mind Literally, “every product of the thoughts of his heart.” In biblical psychology, mental phenomena fall within the sphere of the heart, which is the organ of thought, understanding, and volition, not of feeling. In later Hebrew, *yetser*, “the thing devised, the product,” is the term for the innate impulses or drives in human beings that dispose them to good (*yetser tov*) or evil (*yetser ra’*), and that can be controlled and directed by the exercise of the will. God’s observation is a judgment on the moral state of man at that specific time.

6. regretted. . . saddened See Comment to 5:29. This is an anthropopathism, or the ascription to God of human emotions, a frequent feature of the biblical narrative. The need for such usage arises from the inherent tension between God’s transcendence and His immanence. On the one hand, He is conceived to be wholly outside of nature, omniscient and omnipotent, sovereign over time and space, and not subject to change. On the other hand, He is also immanent in the world, not withdrawn from it, a personal God who is actively involved in the lives of His creatures, approachable by them, and responsive to their needs. God’s transcendence requires formulation in abstract, philosophical language that poses the danger of depriving Him of personality and relevance. God’s immanence must unavoidably be expressed in concrete, imaginative terms that entail the risk of compromising His invariability. The biblical writers frequently took that risk for the sake of emphasizing God’s vital presence and personality; otherwise, the God idea would have lost all meaning for them. Statements like that in Numbers 23:19, “God is not man to be capricious, / Or mortal to change His mind,” and 1 Samuel 15:29, “He is not human that He should change His mind,” serve as a corrective to the misunderstanding that may arise from a passage such as this one. In both instances, the Hebrew uses the same verb, here rendered “regretted.”

saddened God’s decision is made in sorrow, not in anger.

7. The LORD said Compare verse 3.

8. Noah Mention of him without further detail presupposes knowledge of 5:28-29.

Noah. . . favor The reason for this is given in verse 9 and in 7:1. The two words in Hebrew constitute an anagram: nh. -h. n.

Noah and the Flood (6:9-9:17)

By the tenth generation after Adam, human evil has reached the ultimate depths. The moral pollution is so great that the limits of divine tolerance have been breached. The world must be purged of its corruption.

The Flood is a cosmic catastrophe that is actually the undoing of creation. But God’s chastisement and grace operate simultaneously, so that out of the disaster comes renewal. One righteous man, Noah, together with his family and representative animals and birds are to be saved in order to regenerate the world.

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. There also exists a Sumerian counterpart to the flood narrative. 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 that a single historic event inspired the original composition. It is precisely 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. The many parallels and contrasts are given at their appropriate place within the commentary. A few significant items of broader interest are mentioned here as introductory material.

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, Atranasis and Berossus stories, and it is reflected in the Sumerian King List.

A crucial point of departure by the Bible 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 Atranasis story the flood is the gods’ solution to the tumult of mankind, which

increasingly disturbs them. 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 that 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 that only in Genesis is the concept of a single family of man possible; indeed, it is a major theme.

From all the foregoing, coupled with the detailed observations made in the commentary, 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*, *yekum*, 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 that 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 YHVH, sometimes *'elohim*—and stylistic variants for the same thing. Examples of the latter are "male and female" in 6:19 and 7:16, but "males and their mates" (lit. "man and his wife") in 7:2; the use of *m-ch-h*, "to blot out," in 6:7 and 7:4, 23, as opposed to *sh-ch-t*, "destroy," in 6:13-17; *m-v-t*, "to die," in 7:22 but *g-v-'*, "to perish," in 6:17 and 7:21; *kol hayekum*, "all existence," in 7:4, 23 but *kol basar*, "all flesh," in 6:13, 17, and 7:21. 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. See Excursus 2 [below].

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 INDICTMENT (vv. 9-13)

9. The story of Noah and the Flood opens with an amplification of the preceding verse (6:8). It makes clear that the election of Noah by God is not a capricious act, but the result of the man's intrinsic moral worthiness.

This is the line of Noah The present rendering regards the characterization of Noah as parenthetical, with this phrase being completed by verse 10. It is preferable to translate "This is the story of Noah" and to take the phrase as the caption to the entire narrative in which Noah plays a central role. 9 On the *'elleh toledot* formula, see Comment to 2:4.

righteous. . . blameless These cardinal terms of biblical Hebrew, *tsaddik* and *tamim*, are used here for the first time without definition, thus presupposing a clearly recognizable quality of virtue favored by God. As Ramban indicates, *tsaddik* has its origin in legal terminology and implies one who is adjudged to be "in the right," which is its meaning in such texts as Exodus 23:7, Deuteronomy 25:1, and Proverbs 17:15. Accordingly, the term *tsaddik* 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, as in Exodus 12:5 and Leviticus 1:3, 10. Only such an animal is acceptable to God, says Leviticus 22:17-25. As applied to human beings, *tamim* acquired a moral dimension connoting "unblemished" by moral fault—hence, a person of unimpeachable integrity. Such an individual enjoys God's fellowship, according to Psalms 15 and 101:6.

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 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. By use of midrash, further support for this view is read into the use of the accusative *'et*, here "with," before "God," in contrast to *lifnei*, literally "ahead of," with the same verb as applied to Abraham in Genesis 17:1. Noah is regarded as needing a divine prop to sustain his integrity, whereas Abraham has moral autonomy. There is indeed a measure of justification in this unfavorable comparison, for, unlike Abraham's response to the case of Sodom and Gomorrah in 18:23-52, 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 See Comment to 5:22. 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.

10. The data given in 5:32 are repeated in order to draw attention to the destiny of Noah and his sons as the common ancestors of a renewed humanity.

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* 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.

before God In the judgment of the One who is the ultimate arbiter of human conduct. No higher authority than willful self-interest had determined human conduct generally.

12. When God saw See Comment to 6:5.

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. Sanhedrin 108a has the idea that even the beasts had corrupted themselves through the intermingling 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. The Utopian visions of Isaiah 11:6-7 and 62:25, which see the animal kingdom as ideally herbivorous, support such a view.

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 that Noah received the order to board the ark on the tenth day of the second month, that is, forty days after the New Year. Because forty is a symbolic number in the Bible, and especially so in this story, it is reasonable to conclude that 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, as in Habakkuk 2:3, Psalms 39:5, and Job 6:11. 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.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR BUILDING THE ARK (vv. 14-16)

While nothing is left to Noah's initiative, he himself must fashion the instrument of his own salvation. The stem *'s-h*, "to make," is featured here seven times to stress this point.

14. ark The vessel, significantly, is called *tevah*. This key word recurs seven times here in the instructions for building the ark and seven times again in connection with the subsidence of the waters in 8:1-14. Yet *tevah*, in the sense of an ark, appears again in the Bible only in connection with the salvation of the baby Moses, in Exodus 2:3-5. The term suggests a boxlike craft made to float on the water but without rudder or sail, or any other navigational aid. It does not use the services of a crew. The use of *tevah* is intended to emphasize 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.

gopher wood This otherwise unknown type almost certainly refers to a coniferous tree of great durability. Sanhedrin 108a and the Targums, as well as Radak, identify it with the cedar. Many modern scholars prefer the cypress both because of a similarity in sound to the Hebrew and because it was widely used in shipbuilding in ancient times, due to its resistance to rot.

compartments This is the traditional understanding of the unique Hebrew *kinnim*. Since the singular *ken* means "a nest," the plural is used here in the sense of "cubicles" for the animals.

pitch The unique Hebrew *kofer* in this sense is identical with Akkadian *kupru*, which was used by Utnapishtim and Atrahasis to caulk their respective ships. The usual word for "pitch" is *chemar*, as in 11:3; 14:10; and Exodus 2:3.

15. cubits Hebrew *'ammah* literally means "forearm," the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger of an average-sized man (cf. Deut. 3:11). The standard biblical cubit is about 18 inches (45 cm.). This would yield dimensions of about 450 feet (157 m.) in length, 75 feet (23 m.) in width, and 45 feet (14 m.) 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 sixty-three compartments in all. The vessel of Atrahasis seems to have had only two decks.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ARK (vv. 17-22)

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.

18. My covenant This is the first biblical use of the Hebrew term *berit*, one of the cardinal and pervasive concepts of biblical theology. It is employed for the relationship between God and man and, especially, between God and Israel. In the present passage it is uncertain whether the governing verb means to fashion a covenant anew or to fulfill one already made. Outside the Flood narrative, all biblical usages of the phrase favor the latter interpretation. The meaning would then be that the divine blessing made to Adam in 1:28 would be fulfilled through Noah and his line, an assurance that he and his family would survive and regenerate the world. However, because “covenant” is not used in connection with the blessing of Adam, the phrase could imply that a new, unconditional guarantee of salvation is now being given to Noah. Still another possibility is to take the term here as anticipating the covenant made after the Flood, as recorded in 9:8-17.

you shall enter the ark, with. . . The human occupants are to be restricted to eight persons in all, a single family from which a renewed family of man will spring.

your sons The males are listed first, then the females. See Comment to 8:16.

19-22. The ark is to be the matrix of a regenerated world.

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

The construction of the ark is completed. Noah is told to enter it together with those destined to be saved. The Flood is unleashed.

THE EMBARKATION (vv. 1-9)

1. Go into the ark The key verb *b-w-*’ appears seven times in this chapter.

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. The thesis of Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and 18:20 about strict individual responsibility is not helpful in deciding the point because it reflects the problems and emphases of another age.

2. clean. . . not clean This division cannot be referring to criteria of human consumption after the Flood, when man was permitted to eat flesh, for no such distinctions are made in 9:2-3. The categories refer only to suitability for sacrifice. 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 Bekhor 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 (cf. v. 10 and 8:10,12). 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 Excursus 2).

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.

forty 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. *six hundred years old* See Comment to 5:32. Six hundred constituted a basic unit of time in the Mesopotamian tradition.

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.

THE CATAclysm (vv. 11-24)

11. The seven-day period mentioned in verse 4 terminated on the seventeenth day of the second month. Whether the New Year fell in the fall or the spring is a matter of dispute in Rosh Ha-Shanah 10b-11b. According to R. Eliezer, whose view coincides with that of Josephus and Targum Jonathan, 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. R. Joshua 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 This sentence is couched in classic poetic phraseology and parallelistic structure (see Comment to 4:23-24). 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 discussed in the Comment to 1:2. The "floodgates of the sky" are openings in the expanse of 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 R. Yohanan in 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.

15. *two each* See Comment to verse 9.

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, not to any independent measures of his own.

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.

was left The Hebrew stem *sh-ʿ-r* connotes survival by design, not accident.

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....”

one hundred and fifty 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

THE FLOOD COMES TO AN END (vv. 1-14)

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. See Comment to 1:2.²

2. 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.”

3-4. According to 7:20, when the Flood crested the ark was just above the highest peak. Hence, a slight receding of the waters would cause it to ground.

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.

² **a wind from God** Hebrew *ruach* means “wind, breath, spirit.” “Wind” is the most popular rendering of the word 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.

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 tops of other mountains in the area became visible seventy-three days after the ark grounded.

THE RELEASE OF THE BIRDS (vv. 6-12)

Forty days later Noah releases a raven and a dove, and the latter twice more, at seven-day intervals. In ancient times mariners would take birds aboard and use them in order to determine their proximity to land. Utnapishtim waits seven days after grounding before releasing a dove, then a swallow, and then a raven. Berossus, too, tells of three separate dispatches of birds, but there are no details about them. It is not known whether the same practice was part of the Atrahasis story.

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 forty-day interval here corresponds to the forty days of rain.

7. sent out Rather, "let out." The Pi'el form of this verb usually carries this nuance.

the raven The representative of the class of ravens. No reason for doing this 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 *araf* 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.

THE GROUND DRIES OUT (vv. 13-14)

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 fifty-six days for the earth to be in the state that it was on the third day of Creation.

THE DISEMBARKATION (vv. 15-19)

15-16. 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.

16. together with your wife The variation in the order of persons from 6:18 and 7:7, where husbands and wives are not listed together, led midrashic sources to infer that sexual

relationships were forbidden in the ark and were permitted to be resumed only after disembarkation.

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. Now that the earth has been purged of its evil, 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 *zevachim*, of which both priest and worshipper partake (cf. Deut. 12:27). Significantly, Noah does not offer a libation, in contrast to Utnapishtim. 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." The omission of libation in the case of Noah throws light on the statement that "the Lord smelled the pleasing odor." The phrase is frequently employed in ritual texts in a specific technical sense, divested of its literal meaning. It simply connotes God's acceptance of the sacrifice, as is clear from Leviticus 26:31. In other words, it affirms that the worshipper's encounter with God is sincere and wholehearted.

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.

EXCURSUS 2

The Chronology of the Flood

As noted in the Comment to 7:6, two kinds of time reckoning are used in the Flood narrative. That based on precise dates informs us that the Flood lasted exactly 12 months and 11 days, including the first and last days. That based on intervals of days is not a complete system in itself; it does not tell us how many days elapsed after the ark rested on Ararat before the mountain tops became visible, or how many days it took after the dove finally failed to return for the earth to be fully dried out. The two modes of calculation are meant to be integrated.

If we now make a calculation taking into account the day formulas, the same result is achieved, provided a month is reckoned as exactly 30 days. This we may conclude since 7:11 and 8:4 state precisely that five months elapsed between the onset of the rains and the grounding of the ark, while 7:24 and 8:3 specify that period to be 150 days.

The following computation thus emerges: To the 150 days just mentioned must be added 74 days between the 17th of the seventh month (8:4) and the first day of the 10th month, when the mountain tops first became visible (8:5), another 40 days before the release of the raven (8:6-7), and a further 21 days for the three forays of the dove (8:10-12). This makes a total so far of 285 days, bringing us to the second day of the 12th month.

On New Year's day, 29 days later, the waters on earth had begun to dry up (8:13), and it took another 57 days for the ground to be completely dried out by the 27th day of the second month (8:14). The addition of 29 and 57 to the 285 gives a grand total of 371 days. Taking 30 days to a month, this figure yields 12 months and 11 days, identical with the conclusion based solely upon the date system.

Of course, a calendar of the type presupposed here is eccentric, but in the ancient Egyptian calendar the year was, in fact, divided into 12 months of 30 days each, yielding 360 days exactly, with five extra days intercalated at the end of the year. In Babylon, too, in addition to the true lunar calendar, there was a schematic calendar composed of 12 months of 30 days.

EXCURSUS 3

The Noachide Commandments

The notion of human responsibility and culpability and the idea of Noah's righteousness must be grounded on the assumption that there existed a moral code that was regarded as universally binding. This assumption is essential to the biblical concept of the morality of God and the moral responsibility of man; if moral laws had not then existed, how could the generation of the Flood be punished for offenses? What would be the source of its moral obligations? The idea of the existence of a moral law that is binding on all humanity is understood in the eschatological judgment of the earth found in Isaiah 24. Verse 5 there reads: "For the earth was defiled / Under its inhabitants; Because they transgressed teachings, / Violated laws, / Broke the ancient covenant."

Rabbinic theology, sensitive to this problem, insisted on the existence of a divine covenant with the whole human race made through the two fathers of humanity, Adam and Noah. In rabbinic parlance, this covenant is known as "the commandments given to the sons of Noah." The term "sons of Noah" is simply a designation for the family of man, both before and after the Flood. Because Israel received an additional revelation at Sinai, which immeasurably expanded the obligations uniquely incumbent on the individual Jew, the description "son of Noah," is, in effect, synonymous with "non-Jew."

There is no rabbinic unanimity as to either the number of “Noachide commandments” or their contents; nor is there agreement as to which were given to Adam and which to Noah. The list that enjoys the widest consensus is as follows:

The prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) bloodshed, (4) incest and adultery, and (5) robbery; (6) the injunction to establish courts of law; and (7) the prohibition against eating flesh cut from a living animal. These seven, all of which are given closer definition in respect to their applicability (BT Chullin 92a; Mishneh Torah Melachim 9.2ff.), are regarded as comprising the minimal moral imperatives essential to the maintenance of an ordered and wholesome society. Most of them would come under the heading of “natural law,” that is, they seem to be inherent in human nature and are rooted or founded in reason (cf. Yoma 67b). However, in rabbinic theology the Noachide commandments are revealed law and the authority behind them is divine, not human. The formulation of Maimonides is: “Whosoever accepts the ‘seven commandments’ and carefully observes them, is among the pious ones of the nations of the world and enjoys a share of the hereafter—provided that he accepts and performs them because the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He ordained them in the Torah and informed us through Moses our Teacher that the ‘sons of Noah’ were originally so commanded.” Maimonides then goes on to stipulate that if a non-Jew practices these commandments solely for philosophic reasons, he would not be considered among the pious gentiles who merit a share of the hereafter. This distinction in motivation is basic to rabbinic teaching because divine authority is considered to be indispensable to the preservation of a system of morality. The ultimate sanction for the values inherent in these laws is that they constitute the will of God. Rational processes are not regarded as sufficient incentives for right action.

Commentary to Genesis 6-8

The Noachide Commandments

BT Sanhedrin 56a

The seven מצוות of “Noah’s children.”

Our Rabbis taught: The children of Noah were charged with seven מצוות: [establishing] courts of law, blasphemy, idolatry, sexual crimes [incest, adultery], bloodshed [murder], theft, [and eating] the limb from a live animal.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and their Wars 8:10

Moshe, our Teacher, passed along the Torah and the מצוות only to Israel, as it is stated, “An inheritance of the community of Ya’akov” (Deut. 33:4), and to all those from the remaining nations who want to convert, as it is stated, “You and the convert alike” (Num. 15:15). But one who did not want [to do so] is not compelled to accept Torah and מצוות.

And in addition, Moshe, our Teacher, was charged directly by the Mighty One to compel all the inhabitants of the world to accept the מצוות the children of Noah were charged with. And anyone who does not accept should be killed. And one who accepts them is the one who is consistently called “resident convert” (גר תושב) and he must accept [those מצוות] upon himself in the presence of three knowledgeable, practicing Jews (חברים).

Excerpted from the Encyclopaedia Judaica

While in the amoraic period the above-mentioned list of seven precepts is clearly accepted as the framework of the Noachide Laws, a variety of tannaitic sources indicate lack of complete agreement as to the number of such laws, as well as to the specific norms to be included. The Tosefta (Av. Zar. 8:6) records four possible additional prohibitions against

- (1) drinking the blood of a living animal;
- (2) emasculation;
- (3) sorcery; and
- (4) all magical practices listed in Deuteronomy 18:10-11.

The Talmud records a position which would add prohibitions against crossbreeding of animals of different species, and grafting trees of different kinds (Sanh. 56b). Nonrabbinic sources of the tannaitic period indicate even greater divergence. The Book of Jubilees (7:20ff.) records a substantially different list of six commandments given by Noah to his sons:

- (1) to observe righteousness
- (2) to cover the shame of their flesh;
- (3) to bless their creator;
- (4) to honor parents;
- (5) to love their neighbor; and
- (6) to guard against fornication, uncleanness, and all iniquity (see L. Finkelstein, bibl.).

Acts (15:20) refers to four commandments addressed to non-Jews, "... that they abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood." This latter list is the only one that bears any systematic relationship to the set of religious laws which the Pentateuch makes obligatory upon resident aliens (the ger ha-gar and ezrah).

Commentary to Genesis 6-8

'Two versions' and a palistrophe

The P version:

This is the line of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God. Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah:

“I have decided to make an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and finish it within a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks.

“For My part, I am going to bring a Flood of waters on the earth, to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of everything that creeps of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to stay alive. For your part, take everything that is eaten and store it away; to serve as food for you and for them.”

And Noah did so; according to all that God commanded him, he did.

Noah was six hundred years old when the Flood came on the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst apart, and the floodgates of the sky broke open.

That same day, Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, went into the ark with Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons, 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. They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him.

The Flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark drifted on the face of the waters. The waters greatly swelled upon the earth and they covered all the high mountains under the whole of the sky; fifteen cubits higher the waters swelled, covering the mountains. And all flesh that moved on the earth died -- birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all humankind. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. The fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had diminished; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to diminish until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were visible.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters began to dry up from the earth. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah:

“Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh -- birds and animals and everything that creeps on the earth -- so that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.”

So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. And every animal, everything that creeps, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

The J version:

Then the Lord said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Of all clean animals, take with you seven pairs, a male and its mate; of the animals that are not clean, two, a male and its mate; of the birds of the sky also, seven pairs, male and female, to keep seed alive on all the earth. For in seven days’ time I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the earth every living thing that I have created.”

And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him. Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two of each, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. And after seven days, the Flood waters came upon the earth.

The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights; and the Lord Himself shut him in. And the waters increased, and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the earth -- humans, 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.

The rain from the sky was held back, and the waters receded steadily from the earth. At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and so it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still upon the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it to him into the ark.

He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a plucked-off olive leaf; and Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more. Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the surface of the ground was drying.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being as I have done. So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

The Palistrophe

The *entire* text is a perfect example of a palistrophe³; that is, a literary structure that turns back on itself, with the first item in the structure matching the final one, the second matching the next-to-last item, and so on. At the center of the structure is one item that stands alone. It is the pivotal element on which the structure depends, meaning that it is the pivotal element on which the story itself depends.

In the Flood narrative, there are 15 pairs of items, meaning that item no. 16 stands alone and is the point of the piece as a whole:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Noah (6:10a ⁴) | 31. Noah (9:19) |
| 2. His sons (6:10b) | 30. His sons (9:18b) |
| 3. The ark (6:14-16) | 29. The ark (9:18a) |
| 4. The Flood will come (6:17) | 28. No flood ever again (9:11-17) |
| 5. Covenant (6:18-20) | 27. Covenant (9:8-10) |
| 6. Food in the ark (6:21) | 26. Food outside the ark (9:1-4) |
| 7. Command to enter (7:1-3) | 25. Command to exit (8:15-17 and 22) |
| 8. 7 days of waiting (7:4-5) | 24. 7 days of waiting (8:12-13) |
| 9. 7 days of waiting (7:7-10) | 23. 7 days of waiting (8:10-11) |
| 10. Entry into ark (7:11-15) | 22. Raven and dove leave ark (8:7-9) |
| 11. God shuts Noah in (7:16) | 21. Noah opens the window (8:6b) |
| 12. 40 days (7:17a) | 20. 40 days (8:6a) |
| 13. Waters rise (7:17b-18) | 19. Waters abate (8:5) |
| 14. Mountains covered (7:19) | 18. Mountain tops visible (8:4-5) |
| 15. 150 days of rising waters (7:24) | 17. 150 days of abating waters (8:3) |
| | 16. God remembers Noah (8:1) |

³ Gordon T. Wenham, "Vetus Testamentum," ed. Alex Preminger and Edward L. Greenstein (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1978 July), 337–40, as quoted in Knight and Tucker, *op. cit.*, 388–90.

⁴ An "a" and "b" indicate the first half and second half of a sentence, respectively.