

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 9

Nahum Sarna

Epilogue: The Regeneration and Reordering of Society (vv.1-17)

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 NEW ORDER (vv. 1-7)

1. 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.

Be fertile See Comment to 1:28. 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.

2-4. Man's power over the animal kingdom is confirmed and enhanced. Animal flesh is henceforth permitted for food, though the privilege is not unrestricted. This concession to human weakness is not a license for savagery.

4. with its lifeblood 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 he-hai*, "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 that 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 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.

5-6. 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.

I will require a reckoning Murder cannot be perpetrated with impunity. God Himself calls the criminal to account. Hebrew *d-r-sh*, 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, “You may not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of a capital crime; he must be put to death.” 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.’ R. Eleazar b. Azariah says, ‘once in seventy years.’ R. Tarfon and R. Akiba say, ‘had we been members of the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have been put to death.’ [However,] Rabban Simeon b. 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 (6:11). 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. The murderer may be put to death because his unspeakable act effaces the divine

image in his victim and within himself, as well, so that his own life forfeits its claim to inviolability. It should be noted that, unlike the law collections of the ancient Near East, the Bible never imposes the death penalty for crimes against the property of one's fellow.

image The other term used of the creation of man in 1:26 and 5:3-9—likeness,” Hebrew *demut*—is here omitted, most likely because the cluster of similar sounding words—*dam*, “blood”; *adam*, “man”; and *demut*—might appear to echo the objectionable Babylonian notion that man was created from clay mixed with divine blood.

THE COVENANT AND THE RAINBOW (vv. 8-17)

The key term in this section is “covenant,” Hebrew *berit*, which is repeated seven times. There are two divine proclamations. In verses 8-11, God's decision, referred to in 8:21, is communicated to the world and is sealed for all eternity by a solemn, unilateral, covenantal pledge that a universal, cataclysmic flood would never recur. In verses 12-17, the world is provided with a visible token of that divine commitment.

9. 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.¹

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.” This weapon is frequently featured in ancient Near Eastern mythology. In the Mesopotamian creation epic *Enuma Elish* (6.82-90), Marduk suspended in the sky and set as a constellation the victorious bow with which he had defeated Tiamat. In Babylonian astronomy, a group of stars in the shape of a bow was mythologically identified with the accoutrements of the war goddess. In the Ugaritic myth dealing with the relationship of Aqhat and the bellicose goddess Anath, a bow plays a prominent role. In the Bible itself, numerous poetic texts figuratively refer to God's bow and arrows and are probably echoes of some now lost ancient Hebrew epic. Against this background, the rainbow in our narrative 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.

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

¹ The same applies in the case of the covenant of circumcision in Gen. 17:10–11, the blood of the paschal lamb in Exod. 12–13, the *tefillin* in Exod. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18, and the Sabbath in Exod. 31:12, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20. See M. Fishbane, “The ‘Sign’ in the Hebrew Bible” (Hebrew), *Shnaton* 1 (1975): 213–234.

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.

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 vine was little cultivated there, and, in any case, the heroes of Mesopotamian epics, unlike Noah, were removed from the world of men and therefore could not be associated with agriculture on earth. Furthermore, mention of Japheth and Canaan takes us out of the Mesopotamian world and into the eastern Mediterranean ambience.

The narrative is also 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 Ham 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 Ham. Japheth's alliance with Shem and the threefold emphasis on Ham'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 ten-generation epoch in the Bible's scheme of human history, in the course of which nations come into existence. The second era concludes with the birth of Abraham, the founding father of a new nation that is to have a special relationship with God and whose fortunes and destiny are henceforth to constitute the major theme of biblical literature. The ensuing narrative gives a preparatory intimation of the direction in which the Book of Genesis is moving. The focus of interest gradually narrows from the universal to the particular, until the birth of Abraham. God makes promises to Abraham that one day his descendants will dispossess the Canaanites and inherit their land. Abraham belongs to the line of Shem, while the Canaanites derive from Ham. The present episode illustrates the virtue and piety of the original ancestor, Shem, values that are to serve as the paradigm for his descendants, the Israelites. By the same token, the typically degenerate state of the Canaanites provides the reason and moral justification for their displacement.

The portrayal of political relationships in terms of genealogies, a phenomenon that will be more fully examined in the Comments to chapter 10, is a well recognized and recurring feature of the Book of Genesis. The filial relationship of Canaan to Ham in our story must be considered against this background. In 10:6, both Egypt and Canaan are among the sons of Ham. In Psalms 78:51, Egypt is termed "the tents of Ham," and in Psalms 105:23, 27 and 106:22, Egypt is again identified with Ham. In other words, Ham in this chapter is most likely symbolic of Egypt, and Canaan, as Ham's "son,"

would be figurative for Egyptian suzerainty over the land of Canaan. This relationship was a historical reality in the Late Bronze Age in the course of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Egyptian Dynasties (ca. 1552–ca. 1200 s.c.E.). The association of Canaan with Egypt finds expression elsewhere in the Bible on a different level. Leviticus 18:3 reads, “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwell, 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 (12:10-20); Abimelech’s dealings with her and with Rebekah in Canaan (20; 26:7-11); the sexual perversions of the Sodomites (19:5-8); Dinah’s experience in Shechem (chap. 34); the offenses of Er and Onan, sons of Judah’s Canaanite wife (chap. 38); and, finally, the attempted seduction of Joseph in Egypt by Potiphar’s wife (chap. 39). 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 Japheth, 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 Japheth 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 Japhethites 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 s.c.E., during the reign of Merneptah, and then again in 1175 B.C.E., during the reign of Ramses 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.

REPEOPLING THE EARTH (vv. 18-19)

18. Ham being the, father of Canaan Rashbam observes that this note is an example of a frequently used literary technique of introducing information seemingly irrelevant to the immediate context yet crucial to the understanding of subsequent developments.² Without it, we would be ignorant of the identity of the object of Noah’s curse.

19. from these the whole world branched out The divine blessing and command of 9:1 are fulfilled. The next chapter will give the precise details and will conclude with a reiteration of the fact that after the Flood the nations of the world branched out from the three sons of Noah. Behind this emphasis is the natural, nonmagical approach of the Bible to the issue of repopling the world. By way of contrast, the Atrahasis Epic ascribes that development to practical magic on the part of the gods, who fashion human beings from clay. In Greek legend, Deucalion and Pyrrha, the survivors of the

² Other examples are 11:28–30; 13:10, 13; 22:20–23; 24:1, 29–30; 25:25, 27–28; 26:34–35; 35:22.

flood, were both told to cast behind them the bones of their mother, which they understood to mean stones from the earth. These miraculously turned into male and female humans.

NOAH'S INEBRIATION (vv. 20-21)

20. the tiller of the soil This phrase, a designation of Noah, implies something well known about him, which links up with 5:29 (see Comment).

was 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. 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.

21. No blame attaches to Noah since he was oblivious to the intoxicating effects of his discovery.

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.

within his tent In the privacy of his dwelling, not in public. This makes Ham's behavior all the more contemptible. Although the cultivation of the vine implies a settled, non-nomadic community, Noah and his sons still reside in tents. The transition from nomadism to sedentary life is indicated.

THE BEHAVIOR OF THE SONS (vv. 22-23)

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

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

a cloth Hebrew simlah is a kind of common cloak, more or less square, that also served as a covering at night. This is clear from Exodus 22:25-26 and Deuteronomy 24:13.

NOAH'S CURSE AND BLESSING (vv. 24-27)

The following is the first example of the genre of parental blessing and cursing, featured again in 27:4, 27-29, 39-40 and especially in chapter 49. As verse 27 shows, the word that issues from Noah's mouth is itself neither the active agent nor automatically effective; rather, the curse and blessing are actually the invoking of God's power in judgment of the conduct of the respective parties, to punish the one and to bestow divine favor on the other.

24. woke up from his wine That is, when he had sobered up. 8

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

his youngest son This description implies a tradition that makes Ham the youngest despite the five-times repeated sequence: Shem, Ham, Japheth. 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 Japheth.

25. Canaan The text is silent as to why Canaan, not Ham, is cursed. Saadia and Ibn Janah construe it to mean “Cursed be [the father of] Canaan,” a phrase that has already appeared twice in this brief narrative. A reasonable assumption would be that in the fuller story Canaan, son of Ham, 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. Bekhor Shor notes that implicit in the pronouncement of the subjugation of Canaan, repeated three times for emphasis, is a word play on the name, connecting it with the stem *k-n-*, “to be humbled, to humiliate oneself.”

shall he be Rather, “Let him be.”

his brothers If taken literally, this would refer to 10:6, but more likely the phrase belongs to the conventional language of curses and blessings. Used of Ishmael in 16:12 and of Jacob in 27:29, 37, it expresses comprehensiveness.

26. Blessed be the Lord In place of the expected blessing on Shem, which would contrast with the curse on Canaan, we find Noah blessing the Lord. Shem’s disinterested, virtuous behavior earns no other reward than that men are inspired thereby to bless the Lord, whose norms of conduct he upholds. The phrasing of the blessing corresponds to that used by Abraham’s servant in Genesis 24:27 and conforms to the later, standard liturgical formula “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,” which may be a spontaneous outpouring of religious feeling or an expression of thanksgiving.

the Lord, the God of Shem Here, too, Bekhor Shor points to word play, for Shem means “name,” and the word frequently evokes the divine name YHVH or the Divine Presence.

27. The blessing for Japheth likewise contains a word play, this one explicit, but the rendering, “enlarge” for Hebrew *yaft*, although traditional, is uncertain. The stem *p-t-h* means “to be open,” and nowhere else does it have the sense of enlargement of territorial boundaries. The phrase may simply be figurative of prosperity. The meaning of the second clause is also problematical. The subject of the verb is Japheth, but elsewhere the idiom means “to displace,” which is hardly appropriate to the present context. The intention must be to convey some unusual, specialized connotation, such as “to live in amity” or “to be allied with.” A subtle point is the use here of the general term *‘elohim*, “God,” with Japheth, in contrast to the sacred name YHVH, which is exclusive to Shem and later to Israel, his descendants.

THE DEATH OF NOAH (vv. 28-29)

These two verses conclude the story of Noah. They belong to the pattern of the listings in chapter 5 and complement verse 32 there.