

We usually associate the book of Genesis with the creation of the entire cosmos and assume that the book of beginnings was intended to address a larger audience than Jews. The creation stories are actually preface to the main event, the story of Abraham that emerges at the end of chapter eleven. Genesis is of Jewish origin and centers in the Jewish story with the intention of introducing the Jewish understanding of God. In spite of the long genealogical lists, the “begats,” the first eleven chapters are prehistorical stories, which, along with the genealogies, introduce the birth of the family-nation Israel. However Jewish in flavor and purpose, the stories of Genesis do offer primitive explanations for basic questions that apply to the whole human family. Some of the material appears to have been borrowed from neighbors and retold with a Jewish spin. Noah and the flood in chapters six through nine is a prime example. The Gilgamesh Epic of ancient Persian origin contains a flood story that is far older than Genesis. The story may have been formed during the Babylonian Captivity in response to the influence of their captors. Flood stories found in numerous other cultures may suggest a historical event in the ancient past not so far removed from modern scientific explanations of the disappearance of the dinosaurs some 65 million years ago. A common catastrophe would certainly have influenced the folklore of affected peoples.

Davis A. Young is a professor of geology at the conservative Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His book *The Biblical Flood* is a fascinating, and somewhat exhausting, study of geological and Christian history with an attempt to find common ground. Davis is devoted to convincing conservative Christians that they must reconcile the Bible with modern science. Perhaps his best contribution is an appendix entitled “Arkeology” that exposes ridiculous claims of having located Noah’s Ark. But the Jewish flood story has no interest in connections with cultural anthropology or geological history. If you want to anchor your boat on the claims of having located Noah’s Ark on Mount Ararat in Turkey, I think you will be at the wrong pier.

In spite of the adult content about mass destruction of life, alcohol abuse, and possible incest, the Flood is a popular children’s story which some believe to have been written for the child’s imagination. Perhaps you would prefer the 2007 comedy movie *Evan Almighty* that presents Morgan Freeman as God and puts the Ark in the middle of Washington, D.C., with a local flood from a failed dam. While we laugh, earthquakes, tsunamis, and massive storms in addition to the constant threat of nuclear annihilation of life from the planet are themes in the daily news and in our worst nightmares. They seem to make the Genesis story relevant to modern life. The Flood is like gum stuck to the sole of your shoe. It is not something you would choose to have around, but it is too persistent to ignore.

**The evil days of Noah are still with us.** At the center, the Flood is Jewish theology. It picks up our Lenten concern for the pervasive presence of Evil on the planet with a final message of hope in the Jewish God of the Covenant whose promise of life is in every rainbow. In fact, Genesis is as obsessed with the problem of evil as it is devoted to the picture of a loving God. The picture of God presented in the Genesis stories of Noah and the flood is enough to make any Christian squirm. After the disobedience of Adam and Eve erupts in family violence—Cain’s murder of his brother Abel—the tendency toward evil expands with the human population to the days of Noah: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” So God (Jahweh the LORD), grieved at the development of creation and sorry for the bad behavior of humankind, decides to blot out all life from the face of the earth, “for I am sorry that I have made them.” One does not have to be a biblical scholar or live among the educated elite to ask: why destroy the animals? Why the overkill? And, not the least of our wondering, why Noah? Noah is qualified as the one righteous man. Depending on where you are reading, either Noah is a really good guy or just one who has “found favor” in the sight of the LORD. Either he is the one righteous, the one right, person on earth, a quality that spills over into his family; or, he is the one chosen person, without any justification or explanation of the divine choice. We are reminded of the ambiguous, divine preference for Abel’s offering. With tongue in cheek, Brueggemann suggests that Noah may have been a Calvinist. Regina Schwartz also sees an early example of Camus, theater of the absurd. The drunken Noah at the end of the story, who curses his son and grandson, thereby fueling future rivalry among the siblings, does not seem very virtuous

even to the primitive mind of the first readers. We are prone to wonder, what has God gained by the deluge? And, how did this story get in the Bible?

We live daily with the prospect of global destruction. The modern deluge may come as a pandemic, a global war, an encounter with a massive meteor, or any number of natural or technological scenarios. In Rotary, former TN Representative David Coffey put on his physics hat to call out the litany of threats to our existence projected by modern science. The numerous possibilities for the end of human civilization were serious but seemed so remote that they inspired more nervous laughter than anxious tears. A similar program in our Forum on Religion and Science was done by U.T. Prof. Soren Sorensen. I recall Doc Emerson's chuckle that the prospects of an exploding or imploding universe sounded like the Book of Revelation.

At bottom, the question that constantly abides with people of faith is where does God fit in the tenuous state of our existence? Shall we assume that every natural disaster is a punishment for human sin? Is God the righteous Judge constantly watching the creatures on this planet with a censorious eye, ready to damn the evil and destroy the sinner? If God is violent in judgment on the world, perhaps God is the source of our problem of violence. Professor of English at Northwestern University in Chicago Regina M. Schwartz wrote *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* to explore the many dimensions of Jewish religion that contribute to human violence. She suggests that the saga of Cain and Abel, Noah's curse on Canaan, and the confusion of language in Babel put God in the dark role of playing humans against one another. For one reason or another, she suggests that the Father God of Judaism is the source of our violent religion.

***The days of Noah present both warning and hope.*** The very human God of Genesis continues to make me squirm. Although Schwartz certainly has a valid complaint about the image of God in Genesis, she chooses to ignore the breaks of light that shine through the darkness. The Genesis God may be more human than we would prefer, attempting to run the creation like a Jewish patriarch attempts to maintain order in his household. The authors of Genesis are not above suggesting, like Schwartz, that the perception of divine punishment on human evil seems to cause more bad behavior. Cain's murder is not the end of murder; it is the beginning that leads to the days of Noah, a historical epoch that makes God sorry that he ever thought of a creation and a decisive determination to sterilize the planet.

While we are shuddering at the prospect of total annihilation of life and the suffering of life forms, keep in mind the ancient imagery here. The Spirit of God hovered over the ocean of chaos to bring into order the creation. Like other ancient cultures, the Jews feared flood waters as a symbol of chaotic disorder constantly threatening to swallow up civilization. Jews were landlubbers. They avoided the sea. Remember that Jonah went to sea to get away from the God who was sending him to Nineveh. Although we cannot ignore that God is in control of the waters of chaos which God rains down on the evil days of Noah, the picture is also one of letting the people who have chosen evil to drown in it. The mythical picture of a union between heavenly beings and human women seems best left in the ancient world where it was produced, but the universal truth stands: humans tend to sow the seeds of their own destruction.

That does not mean that we should attribute every natural disaster on earth to the judgment of God on sin. Blaming the victim is persistent in the Old Testament in spite of Job's objection, and it continues in the Gospels when the disciples want Jesus to explain "who sinned" the man born blind or his parents? Jerry Falwell's attempt to tie AIDS to homosexuality and the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center as God's judgment on pagans, abortionists, feminists, and gays in the US was not a new rationale for public disaster. I don't believe in that kind of God, and I find plenty of evidence in the biblical revelation to move beyond that kind of God.

Walter Brueggemann puts the picture of God in perspective. God is described in Genesis 6, not as a God of anger and vengeance out to inflict pain on humanity along with all living things, but as a God of deep sorrow, grieved by the direction in which the world was moving. Grief is a response of a responsible, caring God and should never be confused with vengeance. Furthermore, God is determined to redeem the creation with a new creation. The waters of chaos that engulfed all living were viewed in 2 Peter as the waters of cleansing that could be compared to baptism. God is not the

aloof divinity of the deists who is unaffected by the creation. God is the God of Incarnation, the God of Process, who is in the creation with us, who suffers with us and seeks a way for redemption of the creation. Finally, God is the dynamic Lord of repentance. People can change because God can change. The sign of the rainbow is a promise "never again." It opens to us the God of promise, the God of Covenant who led his people through the stormy waters of Jewish history. This God of redemptive hope stands with his people in the waters of the Jewish Holocaust and continues to lead us to the Promised Land.

Five times the Bible refers to the epoch described in Genesis as "the days of Noah," in reference to the time of evil that brought down the destruction of the world. The warning is appropriate. These are the days of Noah and the threat of destruction continually hangs over our heads. But typical of the Bible, the background of destruction is only background. The foreground is the ground of hope in the persistent Creator who will not abandon his children no matter what. Like clay in the potter's hand, the world is in the process of creation by a persistent Creator who will not abandon the creation. Like the dying Christ praying for the forgiveness of his tormentors, the God of Creation is the God of forgiving grace.