

Noah and the Flood- From Cataclysm to Covenant

Lorna Downey

Cork Scripture Group – Spring 2024

The story of Noah and the flood is told in Genesis chapters 6-9. This is a story from pre-history, set in the far-distant past before recorded history. It can be considered a foundational myth. So while it may not be entirely factual this does not mean that it does not contain any truth. All mythical stories are extremely serious, they are humanity's first reflections on their most existential questions. Myths try to explore the origins and meaning of human existence and our purpose in the world. We can learn a lot about the cultural mindset of a people from their foundation myths and the gods they believed in.

The story of Noah describes a devastating flood which destroys the whole world and wipes out everyone and everything, however God saves Noah and his family. For background to this story we must look at life in the Fertile Crescent , specifically Mesopotamia, location of Ur, the ancestral homeland of Abraham, now modern day Iraq. This region is known as the Cradle of Civilisation. The Fertile Crescent stretched from Egypt in the north west along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea into modern day Turkey in the north east, turning south along the Tigris and Euphrates river basins to the Persian Gulf. These rivers watered the land and enriched the soil enabling the first farmers to settle here. Small human settlements grew into cities which would give rise to prosperity and safety, developments in technology , written language and ultimately see the rise of some of the world's great empires : Assyria, Babylon, Persia to name a few. There are several stories from the region describing devastating floods which are remarkably similar to the Biblical flood narrative in Genesis, notably the Gilgamesh Epic. The source seems to be the collective memory among these peoples of one or more disastrous floods in the region which were so disruptive and overwhelming as to be remembered as a worldwide catastrophe. In an age when most people lived their entire lives in a small region relatively close to their place of birth it's not hard to see how a devastating natural disaster would be seen as a worldwide event, when indeed their whole world would have been turned upside down. It is also easy to see how something so horrific and inexplicable could be interpreted as some form of punishment being meted out by each culture's deities. Even today, with science able to explain and often accurately predict natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes, we are often left reeling at the sheer devastation and havoc that can be wreaked by the forces of nature.

Science, specifically geology and archaeology , can support the theory of an actual massive flood event or two in the fertile crescent region 7,000 to 10,000 years ago. Excessive glacial melt in the mountains to the north of the region which fed the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates could have carried a deluge through their

floodplains with devastating consequences. Perhaps extreme weather events caused the floods. There are some theories that volcanic activity or earthquakes caused a huge tsunami which may have inundated the region. We may perhaps only ever speculate as to the cause at this far distance from the event, but as early as 1928/29 excavations at the Mesopotamian sites of Ur and Kish discovered large clay deposits indicative of flooding in the distant past. So for those who like proof we have some indications that the flood stories in the Hebrew Scriptures and the cuneiform sources (Gilgamesh Epic) may have an origin in actual events.

Noah and Utnapishtim (the protagonist in the Gilgamesh flood story), while sharing similar events in their flood narratives, are faced with very different Gods. The gods of Utnapishtim were cruel and lazy they basically created man to do all the jobs they hated, they fought among themselves a lot and grew jealous of mankind's accomplishments. The God Enlil decided to destroy them all in a flood and enlisted help from other Gods to do this. Utnapishtim tells the story to Gilgamesh of how he was warned by one of the gods Ea, and instructed to demolish his house and build a boat to save his family and as many people and animals as he could. Enlil was furious that someone managed to survive the flood and guessed they had been helped by Ea. Ea accused Enlil of disproportionate punishment and urged him to be compassionate. Ultimately the Gods lamented their decision to destroy everything and were grateful that Utnapishtim managed to save as much as he did, and they granted him immortality as a reward. The god of Noah however was always just and merciful and had great love for his creation and despite man's propensity for evil God saved his faithful ones.

The Hebrew Scriptures were mostly written and compiled after the return from exile and captivity in Babylon. The people saw the exile as a punishment from God for not being true to Him as a people. The remnant who returned to Jerusalem were repentant and reinvigorated in their faith and genuinely wanted to return to God in faith and hope, to begin again. They looked on their return to their homeland as a miracle and they interrogated their past to see where God had intervened before to save them and bring them home... of course the key foundation event for them was their liberation from slavery in Egypt. God raised up Moses as a leader and through the great signs and wonders of the plagues and the Passover convinced Pharaoh to set them free, God brought them through the sea to dry land, gave them commandments to live by and the covenant promise to be their God and they would be God's people. It is easy to see then, how looking back at their origin stories, that the great flood would be interpreted as an intervention in history by God and also as a moment of instruction , salvation and promise. So when the Biblical scribes set about writing down their history as a people, their foundational myths are infused with their belief in One God who creates a people for Himself, intervenes in their history and wills for mankind to be free. In fact the first mention of a covenant in scriptures is the one God makes with Noah.

With all this in mind we approach Genesis chapters 6-9 with fresh lenses and perhaps find new perspectives in a very old story.

In Noah's story there is a great reversal of creation, a destruction of the order of things, the freeing of the waters from the boundaries God decreed in the opening chapters of Genesis; such was God's frustration and disappointment with the stewards he had appointed to care for it all. In Noah's story God saved humanity from itself. By saving Noah and his family and all the creatures gathered in the ark, a second chance was given to steward the earth as God had originally intended. Sean Mc Donagh writes that "Genesis calls us to imitate a gracious God who loves creation and cares for the earth" (*Why are we Deaf to the Cry of the Earth?* p 44). He reminds us that God declared from the beginning that creation is good. Humanity is challenged to imitate God's loving kindness and faithfulness, and to be God's representative, as Noah was, in caring for the non-human elements of creation. In Job 38-41 we're told Creation has intrinsic value because it was created by God and is sustained by God's Spirit. God's covenant with Noah points to the interdependence and interconnectedness of all creation. In the Incarnation of Jesus God becomes not only a human being but also a living part of all creation; therefore creation is a community of beings and the natural world interconnected with each other and with God. If we are to honour this relationship humanity cannot continue to exploit and destroy creation in the way that we have been doing.

Some questions to consider

How are we to live gently on the earth, to safeguard and to keep it like Noah did?

When we look to the sky and see a rainbow, we know God is watching and remembering – How do we honour this covenant and ensure that we leave a beautiful fertile world for our children's children?

Back in 2001 Pope St. John Paul II called for "Ecological Conversion" , as we approach the needs of our world and protecting our planet. How do we do this?

Can we start some ecological conversations in our homes and churches, in our workplaces and with our public representatives?

Recommended reading

Why are we Deaf to the Cry of the Earth? , Sean Mc Donagh, Veritas 2001.