

A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

The Noah of Genesis and the Noah of the Rabbis

Parashat No-ah, the Torah reading for this coming Shabbat, is renowned for the annual debate on Noah's character that is sparked by the opening verse. Immediately, we are introduced to the person of Noah, the man who will ultimately come to save humanity and give the world a second chance. We are told, "Noah was a righteous man (*tzadik*); he was blameless (*tamim*) in his age; Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). While, at first glance, the reader interprets this verse as complimentary of Noah, a deeper and slower reading yields a more nuanced interpretation. What is the import of "in his age"? Commentators triggered by Tractate Sanhedrin 108a argue that this qualification may be read to his detriment; for had Noah lived in the age of Abraham, perhaps he would have been mediocre at best. Must we understand these three words, "in his age," as taking our hero down a few notches?

Professor Ze'ev Falk (z"l) argues that we must give Noah the proverbial benefit of the doubt. Although Falk acknowledges that the opening verse may be read either in praise or in criticism of Noah, he chooses to side with the former. Professor Falk explains that the critique of our protagonist is rightly deserved and most likely derives from the fact that Noah seemingly does nothing to alert his fellow humans to their imminent destruction. Some have even gone so far as to dub Noah a "tzadik in a fur coat," that is to say, he tends to his own needs but cares less for others. Falk, however, argues that the fact that Noah does not save his generation is not necessarily a reason to diminish his character. After all, Deuteronomy uses the same adjective to describe God (*tamim* [blameless]), and God does not seek to save a "crooked and perverse generation" (Deut. 32:5). Therefore, Falk writes that "Noah is similar to God" in this respect.

The question of Noah's goodness then is complex and multivalent. I am comforted by the rabbinic imagination, which imagines Noah not only building the Ark, but also planting the trees from which the cedar wood would come. The midrash paints a portrait of trees growing over a long period of time and then Noah building the Ark. Passersby question Noah, and he replies to each individual that "God is about to destroy the world," thereby giving his generation a chance to repent (something that is completely absent in the text). The Rabbis themselves could not imagine that one described as a *tzadik* and *tamim* would not be active in saving others from imminent punishment. It is this message that each of us must take to heart. To be blameless and righteous is to care not just about one's self, but about the "other" as well. May we emulate both the Noah of Genesis and the Noah of the Rabbis.

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Torah from JTS

No-ah 5774

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies and provost, JTS.

Why Did God Flood the World?

The end of Parashat Bereishit finds God regretting the creation of humankind and resolving to wipe it out along with "beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky" (Gen. 6:7)¹. A note of optimism creeps into the concluding verse (6:8), however, with the statement that Noah, whose birth and naming were noted in 5:29, "found favor" with God. The beginning of Parashat No-ah reintroduces Noah in complimentary terms (6:9), but reverts almost immediately to a description of the "corruption" besetting the world (6:11). The particulars are not spelled out, but their effect is to fill the earth with *hamas*, a term that admits various translations:

Jewish Publication Society, 1917: "the earth was filled with *violence*."²

Jewish Publication Society, 1985: "the earth was filled with *lawlessness*."

Judaica Press: "the earth became full of *robbery*."

The Judaica Press translation is based on Rashi's commentary:

"Now the earth was corrupt" connotes illicit sex and idolatry, as in "lest you corrupt" (Deut. 4:16) and "for all flesh had corrupted" (Genesis 6:12). "The earth became full of *hamas*" refers to "robbery" (*gezel*).³

Rashi's commentary is based in turn on two talmudic sources:

Sanhedrin 57a: Wherever "corruption" is mentioned, it must refer to illicit sex and idolatry. Illicit sex, as it is written, "all flesh had corrupted

- ¹ Rashi proffers two rabbinic explanations for the destruction of animals: (1) they had "corrupted their way" in their own right; and/or (2) since they were created for the benefit of humans, a world without people would have no need for animals.
- ² *Violence* is by far the most common translation. See, for example, KJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV.
- ³ Elsewhere the Rabbis distinguish *gezel* from *hamas*. See, for example, Bava Qamma 62a; Genesis Rabba 31.5. The halakhic distinctions are understood to be rabbinic, but not biblical. See Tosafot on Bava Qamma 62a: "in the language of Scripture there is no difference between them."

its way” (Genesis 6:12). Idolatry, for it is written, “Lest you corrupt yourselves and make [for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever]” (Deut. 4:16).

Sanhedrin 108a: Come and see how great the power of *hamas* is. Although the generation of the flood transgressed all laws, their decree of punishment was sealed only because they stretched out their hands to rob, as it is written, “the earth became full of *hamas*” on account of them, and “I am about to destroy them with the earth” (Gen. 6:13).

While there is “violence” in the opening chapters of Genesis, especially Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen. 4:8) and Lamech’s vicious taunt song (Gen. 4:23–24), there is none in evidence in the immediate lead-up to the flood. The same might be said with respect to both idolatry and theft, although it has been suggested that “theft” is a metonymy for many types of wrongdoing.⁴ Illicit sex does fit the context, but the bare citation of Genesis 6:12 as a proof text in Sanhedrin 57a does not make the link explicit. In his commentary on the talmudic passage, Rashi clarifies:

“For all flesh had corrupted its way on earth” refers to illicit sex, as it is written, “How a man has his way with a maiden” (Prov. 30:19).

The two verses are linked by their common use of the word *derekh* (way), and the “way” of Proverbs 30:19 is taken to refer to sexual intercourse in Qiddushin 2b. Rashi continues:

“The flood generation was punished for illicit sex, as it is written, ‘the sons of God saw how beautiful the daughters of men were’” (Gen. 6:2).

In context, the cohabitation described in Genesis 6:1–4 provides a pretext for God’s decision to destroy the world, yet most traditional commentators eschew the connection. While Rashi remarks on it in his Talmud commentary, he does not mention it in his Torah commentary, and the omission seems intentional. One might suggest that by relegating Genesis 6:1–4 to the end of Parashat Bereishit, the Rabbis sought to *disengage* the story of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men”⁵ from the flood story. In so doing, they encouraged commentators to read the flood story as a morality play: the cause of the devastation was not an obscure incident of mythical character, but persistent human evil that retains its potential to wreak destruction (see Gen. 6:5 and 8:21).

The problem with that way of interpreting the flood story is that while it teaches

⁴ See Rabbi Azariah Figo (Italian, 1579–1647), *Bina la-ittim*, sermon 64, 74a.

⁵ Space limitations preclude discussion of the identity of these two groups. The commentators are divided over whether the term “sons of God / the gods” denotes angels or lesser divine beings on the one hand, or some special class of humans on the other. Rashi on Genesis 6:2 offers both alternatives. For a critique of the angelic alternative (adopted by the author of Enoch among many others), and an excellent interpretation that fits the context, see the Torah commentary of Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal), Italian (1800–1865), 38–39.

a valuable lesson about morality and human responsibility, it also leaves the flood without any evident purpose aside from punishment. If the goal was to improve human behavior, it was a failure: violence and immorality reasserted themselves almost immediately and, regrettably, continue to flourish.

Some ancient interpreters, pondering the connection between Genesis 6:1–4 and the flood, sought a different explanation. A story in the non-canonical Book of Enoch with a parallel in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls is most remarkable in this respect.⁶ The baby Noah appears “strange, not like a human being, and resembling the sons of the God of heaven” so his father Lamech fears that his putative child actually is the offspring of one of the illicit unions described in Genesis 6:1–4. In the Qumran version, Lamech confronts his wife, who is named Bitenosh. She tearfully denies any infidelity on her part, reminding Lamech of the passion that they shared in conceiving their son. Lamech is not assuaged, so he solicits information from his grandfather Enoch, who is privy to heavenly secrets. Enoch instructs Lamech’s father Methuselah, “Make known to your son Lamech that he who has been born is in truth his son,” who is destined to survive the impending destruction.

The implication of the story is that the purpose of the flood was not to repair human conduct, but to wipe out the demigods, the progeny of the union of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men.” Noah was spared not because of generic righteousness, but specifically because—as the author of Enoch evidently understood Genesis 6:9—he was “*innocent (tzadik)* in that he was *perfect in his generations (tamim . . . bedorotav)*.” In other words, he had a direct and unadulterated line of descent from Seth (Genesis 5:3), from whom “the world was built up.”⁷ That interpretation has considerable merit: plural forms of *dor* (generation) occur 51 times in the Bible, always referring to generations past or future and never to contemporaries, unless this verse is the unique exception.⁸

Read in this manner, the flood story contributes to one of the great biblical themes, namely the setting of clear boundaries between the respective realms of God and humans. As the psalmist says, “The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man” (Ps. 115:16). The world that the biblical authors are shaping is a world in which it is possible neither for gods to descend to earth in order to commingle with humans, nor for humans to attain divinity by building a “tower with its top in the sky” (Gen. 11:4). It is not the world of myth, in other words, but the real world in which we live.

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⁶ Enoch chapter 106 / Genesis *Apocryphon*, column II (1Q20 [1QapGen] II: 1–26).

⁷ Quoting Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar (Moroccan, 1696–1743), Or *ha-hayyim* on Genesis 5:3.

⁸ Contrast Genesis 7:1, where Noah is called *tzadik ba-dor ha-zeh* (righteous in this generation [singular]).