



The Middle East Initiative

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Reading Noah in a Modern Context

By Anne-Marie Teeuwissen

Scripture

Genesis 7:21-24 and Genesis 8:1-5, 20-22

²¹And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; ²²everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. ²³He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human



beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. ²⁴And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days.

8. *But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; ²the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, ³and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; ⁴and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.*

²⁰Then 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. ²¹And when the Lord smelt the

pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. ²² As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'

Text Exegesis

The story of Noah is not a new narrative at the time it is written and consigned in the Book of Genesis in the form that has been passed down to us through the centuries. The intention of the writer(s) appears to be to introduce a pre-existing Babylonian myth but giving it a **totally new theological intention**. Indeed, several narratives of the Flood exist in earlier Mesopotamian literature (Akkadian, Sumerian – 2nd millennium BC). Although it is not possible to prove a direct link between these earlier narratives and the account in Genesis, there are so many similarities that it is possible to say that the author of Genesis was familiar with them. The differences between the other versions of the story and that of Genesis are therefore significant; in the Mesopotamian narratives, men are only in the story as slaves for the gods to be able to rest, where as in Genesis, the message is clearly that **God renews his blessing to the whole Creation, and that He is at work in the story of mankind**.

In the 2nd Chapter of Genesis, Adam (as human) was given the task of naming every living creature. What this implies is that human beings share the responsibility of other creatures' existence. We were given intelligence, senses, and imagination in order to look after God's creation, make it prosperous, and generate wealth for all. In past generations, for centuries and more, humans relied on the sun and the moon for their survival, on winds and rain, while actually being subject to the forces of nature they had no idea how to control – other than by the illusion of pagan forms of worship. Mother Nature, and natural phenomena were personalized and made sacred. With the Revelation of God's word, there begins a totally different story.

How did the Flood come about? What does the writer say about the reason for it? In Chapter 6:5-6, we read, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 'And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart". The wickedness referred to here concerns all humankind, not only those born to women from the sons of God. Wickedness, evil, sin, whatever word we use, we are talking about a form of disruption or breakdown of an original harmony in the relationship of love between God, humans and other living beings. This disruption is a threat to the entire Creation, and to life on this planet – but in the end, we see God consoling human beings from the flood, and establishing a covenant with all creatures, not only mankind.

There is another essential angle to this covenant. After centuries of Judaism, when Christians read the Old Testament, they often focus on the covenant with Abraham, and on the place of Israel as the chosen people. Noah reminds us that God's plan includes all nations. Faith in God doesn't set Israel aside from other nations. On the contrary, Israel as a people is at the center of the covenant. Noah was not one of the Hebrew people – which didn't yet exist as such– yet he is later seen as a major figure of justice by Israel. He “became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith” (Hebrews 11:7)

Relating the Text to Today

Western civilization has often considered humankind as the master of God's creation in a very technical sense. Was that God's original intention? Considering the New Testament, and the example of Jesus Christ as Master, we see Him in a position of service to others. Being the master is holding responsibility, but more essentially being available for, being in charge of, looking after. In this sense, as human beings we are in charge of looking after God's creation, first and foremost the planet we live on. The industrial revolution introduced new developments that have allowed humans to free ourselves from a number of chores. But during this process, we lost part of the knowledge we used to have of the natural world surrounding us, often living in an urban environment where we sometimes end up being almost totally disconnected from the realities of nature and its cycle. The understanding one has of how the world 'holds together' is usually fragmented, and nowadays it takes an effort to return to a more holistic vision of the universe.

The COP 22 (Conference of Parties) will be held here in Marrakesh later this year, opening on Nov. 7. In Morocco, we live in the context of a rapidly changing developing country – with strong traditions still very much alive. Hence daily life can be very different from the routine of the Western world, and in many aspects, some of them are very contradictory! Focusing on environmental issues only, one thing seems obvious however: the entire population of this planet cannot afford to align itself and live by standards seen as 'minimal comfort' in the West. Some climate sceptics may disagree, but it is generally acknowledged today that if a population of seven billion lived the 'American way of life', the consequences would be dramatic in terms of climate change and the environment. Should the non-Western world just sit back and watch the happy few continue living as they have so far?

In the lead up to the COP 21 meeting in Paris last year, many Christians and churches joined forces to draw attention to environmental problems and related justice issues. We need to concentrate on long term answers, and not to be so shortsighted. As Christians, we share the responsibility of the state of the Creation with all human beings – and with our Lord and Creator. Reading the narrative of Noah reminds us that harmony between humankind, all living creatures and our Lord is essential, and was the goal in the Covenant given to Noah. Unlike other covenants in the Bible, the covenant that God entered in with Noah is a one way alliance – God alone commits

himself to ‘never destroying every living creature’ as God had done. Through Noah and his family, all humans are included.

For a Christian living in Morocco, another interesting feature of the character of Noah—as with some others from the Hebrew Scriptures—is that he is also a prophet in the Koran. Although the narrative differs from the Biblical text, both Noah in the Bible and Noah in the Koran call for a radical change, for human renewal in a return to God – taking responsibility for our own acts and for the creation with which we have been entrusted. Thus Noah can be an inspiration to Jews, Christians and Muslims in efforts to root our statements about environmental issues and climate change in each of our faiths, and through our interfaith dialogue.

What Noah tells us today is that we are responsible for what is happening to our environment, to the state of the planet we are leaving to our children and grandchildren, to animals and all living creatures around us. That men and women together can resist and combat violence and idolatry. That despair is not the only answer, when life can begin again after the Flood.

Questions

1. Has climate change had an impact on my daily life? What about my grandchildren? What kind of world will they be living in?
2. How often do I think about people who have always walked to where they need to go – because they don’t have another choice - when I drive my car?
3. Am I aware of what my family lifestyle implies in terms of water/energy consumption – compared to an average family on the African continent?
4. As a Christian, what am I doing or could be doing about it?
5. How does my church address this issue?
6. In what ways has technology estranged me from a more profound link to nature around me? What can I do about this in my daily life? What could we be doing about this together as a Christian community? If already involved, how can we share our good practices and help Christians elsewhere to take them on?
7. How can I (we as a Christian community) contribute to re-introducing a more humanist culture in the training and education of scientists and engineers?
8. Noah’s story can be read as an answer to the fundamental question: does God intervene in our history? Think about situations in your life / your church’s life where God has intervened.

Prayer

Heavenly Parent, we come to you today remembering Noah. Many times, we have seen the rainbow in the sky after rain. We are amazed by your glory, and remember the Covenant given to him. May we also remember your promise: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

Open our eyes to the wisdom of your Word, that we may see some of the distractions offered by technology as tools only, not our daily bread.

Help us to stay aware that as the universe You have created maintains day and night, summer and winter, we humans should not interfere in the smooth functioning of cold and heat, and that it is our shared responsibility that harvests yield enough for all humans to satiate their hunger.

We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who as a Master, taught us to serve our sisters and brothers in humanity, daughters and sons of God. Amen

Anne-Marie Teeuwissen settled in Morocco in 1983. She was a member of the Protestant Church (EEAM) Executive Committee for many years, and was a delegate to several World Communion of Reformed Churches regional and international meetings. She is a member of Islamic-Christian Research Group (GRIC) and now acts as a consultant for the Center for Research and Training in Interfaith Relations in Rabat. She has also been involved in the community sector, particularly Migrant Protection issues. A Franco-American, she is retired from the British Embassy, where she served as locally engaged Vice-Consul (Rabat), and Arts & PR Officer (British Council). As a translator, she focuses on the field of social sciences regarding the Maghreb.