

Consensus

Volume 33

Issue 1 *In Honour of Dr. Erwin Buck*

Article 3

11-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Greifenhagen, F. V. (2008) "The story of Noah: violent exclusionary apocalyptic is (not) good to think," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss1/3>

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The Story of Noah: Violent exclusionary apocalyptic is (not) good to think¹

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“Cause God is a killa from the start,
Why do you think Noah, had to build his arc [*sic*]”²

The story of Noah and the Ark and the Great Flood is the single best known biblical narrative today, not only in religious circles but also in the secular world. Noah’s story, for instance, is the most frequently published secular trade edition of a children’s Bible story — there are more children’s titles about Noah than about any other biblical character, including Jesus.³ In addition, the story of Noah has spawned numerous spin-offs such as stuffed animals, toys and nursery decorations. How can this be? How is it that a story that narrates the utter and virtually complete, devastating destruction of all human and animal life on earth can be so popular, especially for children?

Of course, most of the tellers of this story for children avoid the destruction, transforming the story into a sugar-coated account of cute animals and rainbows. Nonetheless, even these tellings usually begin with some vague premise that people have done something serious enough to warrant severe punishment. Usually, children’s books on Noah mention some generalization such as “There were ... many wicked people in the world.”⁴ But sometimes more specific behavior is described: “... the people were not good. They were violent and selfish. They stole and told lies.”⁵ Interestingly, these are misbehaviors for which children are often reprimanded and punished. The same children’s books tend to portray Noah and his family, in contrast, as hardworking, cheerful, cooperative, trusting, and especially obedient — exactly the qualities adults like to see in children. So perhaps the Noah story is so popular for children because its implicit, yet literal, message, “... if you’re not good, God will slay you,”⁶ provides a powerful tool for socializing children into approved

behavior.⁷ Unacknowledged in all of this is the paradoxical fact that children are the invisible casualties, the obscured innocent victims, of the flood.⁸

Therefore, I would like to argue that a deeper and more disturbing current runs under this popular understanding of the Noah story as a lesson in obedience. The narrative of the flood in Genesis 6-9 is the first biblical instance of an exclusionary apocalyptic pattern in which the righteous few are whisked out of harm's way while the rest of creation, regardless of relative guilt or innocence, is subjected to spectacular and complete destruction.⁹ While this pattern is reiterated in fuller form in other biblical books and texts that are formally identified as belonging to the genre of apocalyptic, the story of Noah in Genesis canonically serves as the original.¹⁰ As such, its power in establishing and/or perpetuating (even if only implicitly) an exclusionary and violent apocalyptic pattern is worthy of investigation, not least because of the allure of apocalyptic thought in our own time and context.¹¹

Two basic lines of inquiry will be pursued in this investigation. First is to ask what problem necessitated the flood and whether the problem was solved. In other words, why did there have to be a flood wiping out all human and animal life except for the few allowed to survive? And did it work? Did the flood fix the problem it was meant to solve? Second is to ask why some were saved while the majority perished. Why are Noah and his family singled out for saving? Did all those who perished deserve their fate? Did no one else survive? Did Noah try to save anyone else?

With these questions, the story of Noah and the flood becomes a narrative through which one can think through important existential issues such as the justification of violence, the true nature of heroism, and the direction of human history in the face of calamity and the inevitability of death. This is the purpose of stories, after all, to help us to think through reality, think through our experiences, to interpret what is going on and to render it meaningful. Thus the title of this article, with its nod to Lévi-Strauss,¹² as well as the question which the title raises: Is it actually good to think the violent exclusionary apocalyptic of the flood story?

The story of the flood has long invited such thought — it exhibits an impressive pedigree. The biblical version of the story is only one point on an extended trajectory that stretches back to the ancient Near

East and from there proceeds onward through various biblical, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim versions and interpretations.

While flood stories have been told by many cultures and societies throughout human history — literally hundreds of such stories have been documented¹³ — the particular shape of the biblical story is first attested in one of the earliest civilizations, that of the Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia. The Sumerians told a story, surviving now only in fragments of a text written about 1600 B.C.E., about a flood that the gods decide to bring about.¹⁴ One of the gods, however, warns Ziusudra, his pious devotee, who is able to escape annihilation in a boat. After the flood, the head god, Enlil, is enraged to discover that a mortal has survived but he is rebuked by the other gods. In the end, Ziusudra is rewarded with immortality.

A similar story, just as ancient but surviving in fuller form, was told in the Akkadian language of old Babylonia.¹⁵ In this version, the junior gods tire of their job of caring for the earth and rebel against their taskmasters, the senior gods. The confrontation is resolved by creating humans who will do the work and serve *all* the gods. However, the humans multiply rapidly and their noise eventually disturbs the sleep of the chief god, Enlil. After unsuccessfully attempting to curtail humanity's noise through plague, drought and famine, Enlil and the other gods settle on a flood to wipe out the humans. However, the god Enki warns his devotee, called Atrakhasis in this version, and instructs him to build a boat. Atrakhasis gathers various craftspeople to build a boat and gathers into it his friends, relatives and diverse animals. They survive the flood, the destructive ferocity of which terrifies even the gods. When the floodwaters subside, Atrakhasis sacrifices to the gods. The story describes the gods as swarming over the sacrifices like flies, perhaps lampooning their dependence on their human servants whom they stupidly almost completely destroyed. Enlil is angered that there are survivors but is rebuked by Enki. Thereafter the gods consider less drastic means to reduce humanity's noise while still maintaining its useful servitude to them.

The most elaborate Mesopotamian version of this flood story appears as an episode of the famous Gilgamesh epic.¹⁶ During his quest for immortality, the hero Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, seeks out Utnapishtim, who survived the great flood and thus received immortality. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh his story — a story similar

to the ones already described above. Warned by Ea (the equivalent of Enki), Utnapishtim builds a huge multi-level boat and loads it with precious metals, all kinds of animals, artisans, and his friends and relatives. After the flood, Utnapishtim offers sacrifices, the smell of which attracts the gods who swarm again like flies around the offerings. Enlil is again enraged, but is chastised to consider less drastic measures of population control, to distinguish between the guilty and innocent, and to be lenient:

How could you, unreasoning, have brought on the deluge?
 Impose punishment on the sinner for his sin.
 on the transgressor for his transgression.
 (But) be lenient, lest he be cut off,
 bear with him lest he fall.¹⁷

These are the stories that echo in the familiar biblical story of the flood. But before proceeding to the biblical story, our two basic sets of questions need to be asked of the Mesopotamian versions. First, what problem necessitated the flood and was the problem solved? The reason for the flood in these Mesopotamian accounts is the *noise* of humanity, that is, humanity's explosive growth in numbers and technology which threatens to undermine human subservience to the gods.¹⁸ For this reason, all of humanity and of the earth's animal population must die, regardless of guilt or innocence. Only because one of the gods has pity on his special devotee do any of the humans or animals survive at all. And, in the end, the flood is only a temporary solution. Humanity is reduced for a time but will soon multiply again. If anything, the flood results in a change, not in the human realm, but in the divine realm — the gods realize that they have been too drastic and arbitrary in their punitive actions.

This latter point is forcefully made in a reference to the flood that appears in yet one more Mesopotamian work, the poem of Erra and Ishum.¹⁹ This poem presents the chief god, named Marduk in this telling, as contrite and remorseful over the senselessness of the flood's devastation. The composer of this poem "disparages the senseless desolation wrought by the gods as typified in the primordial flood ... He exposes the flood for what it really is when stripped of its re-creative attachments, the *epitome of meaningless destruction*."²⁰

As to the second question, namely, why some were saved while the majority perished, the Mesopotamian accounts portray the hero's

devotion to a particular god as the reason that he is chosen to survive. In fact, it is dissension within the ranks of the gods, dissension between those who would destroy and those who would save, that allows for someone to survive at all. In these accounts, generally the hero survives with a rather large number of others — not only his family, but also his friends and various craftspeople, as well as animals. Does the hero in these accounts attempt to save or warn others? No — in fact, in both the Atrakhasis and Gilgamesh versions, the hero intentionally deceives his fellow citizens as to why he is building a boat.²¹

We turn now to how do these dynamics play out in the biblical story of the flood in the book of Genesis. Anyone familiar with this story would readily recognize the manifold similarities between it and the older Mesopotamian precedents described above. The question is whether or not the biblical and Mesopotamian versions exhibit the same overall pattern.

First, what problem necessitated the flood and was the problem solved? The biblical story offers several reasons for the flood. “The LORD [i.e. YHWH] 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” (Gen 6:5).²² In other words, humanity is completely rotten at the core, characterized by wicked or evil thoughts and inclinations. A more specific reason is given several verses later: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s [i.e. Elohim’s] sight,²³ and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth” (Gen 6:11-12). Here the story focuses more specifically on violence and the ruination caused by ruthless abuse. The rhetoric of this justification for the flood, as also the reason given in verse five, implies that *all* human beings were guilty and deserving of destruction. Only Noah found favor with YHWH (Gen 6:8); only he is described as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation,” “one who walks with God”²⁴ (Gen 6:9). In other words, only Noah deserves to be saved — yet the text does not specify exactly how Noah is righteous. Furthermore, his wife and his three sons and their wives are saved also, with no word as to their qualifications. And although representative pairs of all the animals are also saved, the rest of the animals are doomed to destruction. The text tells us that “*all flesh* had corrupted its ways,” so supposedly we are to imagine all the

animals, except for the pairs who are saved, as having been corrupt and violent.²⁵ Otherwise, the choice of which pair of each animal to save was arbitrary.

The biblical version suggests also an alternative or perhaps additional or complementary reason for the flood. The beginning of the sixth chapter of Genesis relates that when humans began to multiply upon the face of the ground, the **בני האלהים** “sons of God,” that is, divine beings,²⁶ desired the beautiful human women and mated with them. The resulting offspring as described as “heroes of old, men of renown” (Gen 6:1-4).²⁷ While the description of these events does not seem to indicate anything necessarily negative, in a worldview according to which everything, including heaven and earth, has its proper place, this mixture of divine beings with human beings is an inappropriate crossing of categorical boundaries and introduces a fundamental imbalance into the cosmic order.²⁸ In fact, a whole tradition of ancient Israelite literature that never made it into the Bible — the Enochic tradition, represented in the Book of Enoch, and in works such as the Genesis Apocryphon and the Book of Jubilees — describes the offspring produced by this divine-human mixture as precisely the problem that leads to the flood. According to the Enochic literature, they are giants who corrupt the earth with their ravenous appetites and by teaching humanity all sorts of forbidden secrets such as magic, instruments of war, and jewelry and cosmetics (*I Enoch* 6-9, *Jubilees* 5, 7). It is this problem that must be wiped away by the flood.

Does the flood in the biblical version solve the problem of violence and corruption and/or does it restore the proper cosmic balance between heaven and earth? The flood is certainly effective in exterminating humans and animals:

And 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, everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He [i.e. God] 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” (Gen 7:21-23)

But did all this destruction achieve its purpose? After the flood God admits, “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”

(Gen 8:21). In other words, as far as humans go, nothing substantial has changed — the cycle of violence and corruption will continue. In fact, it even worsens for now God gives permission for humans to eat meat (Gen 9:3), a form of violence against animals, and a change from the vegetarian diet of humans before the flood.²⁹

What has changed is the divine, or God. Whereas before the flood God was sorry or repented that God had made humans (Gen 6:6), now God, smelling the pleasing odor of Noah's sacrifice, resolves never again to destroy all living creatures on account of humans (Gen 8:21). God makes a solemn promise, articulated as a covenant with Noah and his descendents and all the animals, that God will never again cut off all flesh by the waters of a flood (9:11). In fact, God places a bow in the clouds, as a reminder to God, not to humans. When God sees the bow, God will remember "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (9:16) and presumably not initiate a cataclysmic destruction again. Like its Mesopotamian antecedents, the biblical flood story does not effect lasting change in the earthly realm, but it does rein in the arbitrary and excessive nature of divine punishment, and implicitly critiques the blind application of destruction to innocent and guilty alike. After all, if "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth," then certainly Noah and his family could not escape this fact of human existence. And sure enough, immediately following the flood the text portrays Noah getting drunk, passing out naked, and then angrily, and illogically and inexplicably, cursing his grandson Canaan because the grandson's father, Ham, had seen him naked (Gen 9:20-28).³⁰

As to the second question, namely, why some were saved while the majority perished, it seems that the righteousness of Noah (Gen 6:9) is seriously compromised at the end of the story. This raises the question of whether he really qualifies as a hero at the story's beginning and middle. For example, while Noah is described as "blameless in his generation" (Gen 6:9), did he attempt to warn others of his generation of the coming doom? Did Noah intercede with God for the doomed people of his time, as Abraham did for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18), or as Moses did for the Israelites after they worshipped the golden calf (Exod 32)? Just as in the Mesopotamian accounts, not a word about this possibility appears in the biblical text. In fact, even fewer humans are saved in the biblical

account — only Noah's wife, three sons and their wives — than in the Mesopotamian accounts where extended family and other relatives, friends, and artisans are also rescued. If Noah is really not so heroic after all, and if “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth,” then it seems that the choice of who to save was made rather arbitrarily.

Yet in the post-biblical tradition, Noah is presented in heroic terms. He becomes, for instance, the archetype legitimizing the necessity of violent distinctions. Some of the Dead Sea scroll material presents Noah as the prototype for Levi, the ancestor of the Israelite priests. Levi and his brother Simeon engaged in a particularly violent and genocidal attack on the inhabitants of the non-Israelite city of Shechem in order to avenge the dishonoring of their sister Dinah (Gen 33:18 — 34:31). While their father Jacob is upset at their actions (Gen 34:30, cf. 49:5-7), the post-biblical tradition legitimizes their violence as the violence necessary to destroy the “workers of violence”.³¹ Precisely the story of Noah is invoked as authority for this interpretation since the flood was a violent destruction necessary to destroy the “workers of violence” (*I QapGen ar col. XI, 13-14*³²).

At the same time, the post-biblical tradition was concerned about the fact that the biblical story said nothing about Noah's relationship with the people of his time. If indeed he was righteous, surely he would have warned his contemporaries and urged them to repent. And this indeed is how Noah is presented, or re-presented, in the work of Josephus, a Jewish writer in the first century C.E. (*Jewish Antiquities* 1:73), and in rabbinic tradition (e.g. b. *Sanhedrin* 108a). The second letter of Peter in the New Testament also makes a gesture in this direction by calling Noah a “herald [i.e. preacher] of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5), and early Christian writings continue this characterization (e.g. *1 Clement* 7:6, 9:1). However, these traditions see Noah's preaching as being overwhelmingly unsuccessful; his contemporaries all refused his message and hence they all deserved to be blotted out.

Behind all of this lurks the pattern of apocalyptic thinking — that is, a pattern in which only a small group of the righteous will survive the cataclysmic punishment at the End of Days by being whisked out of harm's way, while the rest of the final generation will deserve their spectacularly violent destruction. Note the absence in this pattern of

any of the critique of arbitrary and excessive divine punishment (divine overkill) such as is found in the Mesopotamian flood stories and is implied in the Genesis flood story.

One more major point on the trajectory of the flood story remains to be explored: the version of the story found in the Muslim holy scriptures, the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, Noah is mentioned quite often throughout the Qur'an and is obviously presented as a figure of some importance.³³ Sometimes his name merely appears on lists of prophetic figures, usually the first in a series of divinely-inspired messengers that leads eventually to the prophet Muhammad. For example, in the fourth surah or chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Nisā'*, in aya or verse 163, the text has God addressing Muhammad with the plural of majesty: "We have sent Revelation to you [Prophet] as We did to Noah and the prophets after him, to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon — to David We gave the Psalms."³⁴

This already indicates something quite important about the Muslim conception of Noah. Noah is not only an ancient patriarch, as in the Bible, but in the Qur'an he is also a prophet. And so, not surprisingly, much of the material in the Qur'an on Noah reports his prophetic speech or preaching in some detail, as well as the reactions to it. The story of building the ark and of the flood itself is barely mentioned, as if the original hearers of the Qur'anic message were already familiar with the details of the tale.³⁵ This is quite a contrast to the biblical version in which Noah does not speak at all except at the very end when he curses his grandson!

Noah's preaching reverberates throughout the Qur'an as a paradigmatic example of the messenger sent by God to warn people to repent and move towards true belief. In order to illustrate the Qur'anic portrait of Noah, a major section on Noah appearing in the eleventh surah or chapter, named *Hūd*, is presented below, beginning with the 25th aya or verse:

We sent Noah to his people to say, 'I have come to you to give a clear warning; worship no one but God. I fear for you that you may suffer on a painful Day.' But the prominent disbelievers among his people said, 'We can see that you are nothing but a mortal like ourselves, and it is clear to see that only the vilest among us follow you. We cannot see how you are any better than we are. In fact we think you are a liar.' He said, 'My people, think: if I did have a clear

sign from my Lord, and He had given me grace of His own, though it was hidden from you, could we force you to accept it against your will? My people, I ask no reward for it from you; my reward comes only from God. I will not drive away the faithful: they are sure to meet their Lord. I can see you are foolish. My people, who could help me against God if I drove the faithful away? Will you not take heed? I am not telling you that I hold God's treasures, or have any knowledge of what is hidden, or that I am an angel. Nor do I say that God will not grant any good to those who are despised in your eyes: God Himself knows best what is in their souls. If I did this I would be one of the wrongdoers.' They said, 'Noah! You have argued with us for too long. Bring down on us the punishment you threaten us with, if you are telling the truth.' He said, 'It is God who will bring it down, if He wishes, and you not be able to escape. My advice will be no use to you if God wishes to leave you to your delusions: He is your Lord and to Him you will be returned.' (11:25-34).

First, note that Noah is sent to preach to *his* people — in this respect he conforms to the Qur'anic model of prophets, each of whom is sent by God to a specific people. Thus, the ensuing flood is a punishment of Noah's people and not necessarily a universal cataclysm. Second, the text expresses not only Noah's appeal to his people to worship the one true God alone, but also his people's arguments against him, and, in turn, his rejoinder. According to the Qur'an, all the prophets encountered great resistance to their message. One can imagine the impression that such a story had on Muhammad who, while preaching in Mecca, also encountered great resistance to his message and, like Noah, was accused of being a mere human, of not bringing any miraculous signs, and of attracting only the lowest dregs of society as followers. This connection is expressly made in a brief interlude in the story that occurs in verse 35. Here the text has God directly addressing Muhammad in regard to the accusations that some were making against him, namely, that he was making up these revelations: "If [these disbelievers — in Mecca] say, 'He has made this up,' say [Muhammad], 'If I have made this up, I am responsible for my own crime, but I am innocent of the crimes you commit' (11:35).

The Qur'anic story then continues with a description of the flood:

It was revealed to Noah, 'None of your people will believe other than those who have already done so, so do not be distressed by

what they do. Build the Ark under Our [watchful] eyes and with Our inspiration. Do not plead with Me for those who have done evil — they will be drowned.’ So he began to build the Ark, and whenever the leaders of his people passed by, they laughed at him. He said, ‘You may scorn us now, but we will come to scorn you: you will find out who will receive a humiliating punishment, and on whom a lasting suffering will descend.’ When Our command came and water gushed up [literally ‘the furnace boiled over’] out of the earth, We said, ‘Place on board this Ark a pair of each species, and your own family — except those against whom the sentence has already been passed — and the believers,’ though only a few believed with him. He said, ‘Board the Ark. In the name of God it shall sail and anchor. My God is most forgiving and merciful.’ It sailed with them on waves like mountains, and Noah called out to his son, who stayed behind, ‘Come aboard with us, my son, do not stay with the disbelievers.’ But he replied, ‘I will seek refuge on a mountain to save me from the water.’ Noah said, ‘Today there is no refuge from God’s command, except for those on whom He has mercy.’ The waves cut them off from each other and he was among the drowned. (11:36-43)

Noah’s preaching has only resulted in a few converts. His people have had their chance and now Noah is to channel his energies into building the ark. When his people laugh at him, Noah retorts, “You may scorn us now, but we will come to scorn you” (11:38) — the time for persuasion has passed. When the waters of the flood come, Noah commands a pair of each animal species to board the ark, along with those few humans who had believed in his message. Among the believers are members of Noah’s family — but not all of them. In contrast to the biblical version, we hear in the Qur’an of one of Noah’s sons who refuses to board the ark, believing that he can save himself on some mountain. But a wave sweeps him away and he is drowned. This incident underlines an important concept: even though family is highly valued, in the end family connections cannot guarantee one’s standing before God. In the biblical account, all those who are saved are members of Noah’s family; in the Qur’anic account, those saved include some, but not all, of the members of Noah’s family, as well as other persons who have come to believe in his message.³⁶ Clearly the Qur’an attempts to show that the destruction of the flood was suffered only by those who deserved it, while all who believed escaped.

The Qur'anic version concludes:

Then it was said, 'Earth, swallow up your water, and sky, hold back,' and the water subsided, the command was fulfilled. The Ark settled on Mount Judi, and it was said, 'Gone are those evil-doing people!' Noah called out to his Lord, saying, 'My Lord, my son was one of my family, but Your promise [i.e. to save Noah's family: 11:40] is true, and You are the most just of judges.' God said, 'Noah, he was not one of your family. What he did was not right. Do not ask Me for things you know nothing about. I am warning you not to be foolish.' He said, 'My Lord, I take refuge with You from asking for things I know nothing about. If You do not forgive me, and have mercy on me, I shall be one of the losers.' And it was said, 'Noah, descend in peace from Us, with blessings on you and on some of the communities that will spring from those who are with you. There will be others We will allow to enjoy life for a time, but then a painful punishment from Us will afflict them.' These accounts are part of what was beyond your knowledge [Muhammad]. We revealed them to you. Neither you nor your people knew them before now, so be patient: the future belongs to those who are aware of God. (11:44-49).

The flood ends, the water recedes, and the ark comes to rest on the top of a mountain. At the announcement that the evil-doers have been wiped away, Noah brings up the matter of his son. Acknowledging God's justice, he, however, questions why his son perished. Perhaps Noah actually thought that his son was a believer, while in fact his son was a hypocrite. Or perhaps he genuinely believed that his son would be saved by virtue of being his son. God's answer cuts through these possibilities: "he was not one of your family, he did not do what was right, do not question what you know nothing about." In response to this divine rebuke, Noah immediately repents and asks for forgiveness. Interestingly, the Qur'an in this instance presents a reversal of the ancient Near Eastern pattern of flood stories, in which, at the end of the flood, the god responsible is rebuked for his arbitrary overkill. In contrast, at the end of the flood in this Qur'anic account, God rebukes his faithful servant, the prophet Noah, for his erroneous view of the divine promises.

While the Qur'anic version is unique in this respect, it agrees with the Mesopotamian and biblical versions that the flood did not effect any permanent or categorical change in the propensity of human beings to evil. Not only does Noah need to ask for

forgiveness, but the divine voice announces that there will still be a difference between those who are blessed, and those who may enjoy life for a while but are destined for a painful punishment. On that note, this particular account of the flood ends by counselling the prophet Muhammad to be patient: the future belongs to those who are aware of God.

Note how aware the Qur'an is that it is telling this story in a specific context. The story is being told to Muhammad and the early small and beleaguered Muslim community in Mecca, saying, in effect, "Hang in there. Even if things seem hopeless, God is with God's messengers. This was so in the past, and therefore it is so also in the present." The narrative of Noah and the flood has functioned, not only for Muhammad and the early Muslims but also for many other hearers of this story, as a paradigm from the past to read the present and predict the future. The reformer, Martin Luther, for instance, in his lectures on the Noah story in Genesis, clearly saw his own time as analogous to the time of Noah, and saw himself as a Noah-figure. Identifying with Noah, he thought himself to be an apocalyptic end-time prophet standing alone against a smug, sinful and wicked world that deserves destruction.³⁷

The story of Noah and the flood thus comes back again and again to an apocalyptic pattern. But the biblical version of this story is strangely absent in most of the standard works on apocalyptic literature and thought in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. For instance, the classic work on the apocalyptic imagination by Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*,³⁸ or the more recent introduction to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic discourse by Carey, *Ultimate Things*,³⁹ contain no significant reference to the biblical story of Noah and the flood.⁴⁰ Cook's detailed studies of Muslim apocalyptic also make no significant reference to the story of Noah.⁴¹ And yet surely the story of Noah and the flood is in a sense the *original apocalypse*, the one that sets the pattern for all the rest: a remnant saved, all the rest violently destroyed, in accordance with God's will.⁴²

We may want to reject the extreme interpretations of the book of Daniel or Revelation or of the Qur'an put forward by religious fanatics to bolster their exclusive self-righteousness; we may find revolting their use of the apocalyptic pattern to justify a callous disregard for human life and violent attacks on others, whether

physical, as in propagating war or advocating suicide bombings, or verbal, as in oppressive and exclusive legislation, and so on. But then we cannot ignore the root of the apocalyptic pattern in the Noah story.

Far from a sunny children's tale, the Noah story accesses our deepest desires for revenge against those we believe to be in the wrong and our propensity to divide the world into a righteous vanguard and all the rest who deserve destruction. Furthermore, the story gives these human inclinations divine justification: if, as in the epigraph to this article Ice Cube raps, "God is a killa from the start," then how much more is human killing justified. In this sense, the flood story is literally a dreadful story of divinely initiated genocide, a tale of terror, a nightmare. So is it worth telling? Is it good to think?

Yes, first because the story reveals this deep apocalyptic pattern of which people seem so enamored. Such dark desires must be brought into consciousness if they are to be countered. And secondly yes, because thinking some texts calls listeners and readers to interrupt and imagine different endings and outcomes.⁴³ The Bible itself provides paradigms for imagining other possibilities and outcomes for the story of the flood. Abraham and Moses interceded on behalf of the recipients of divine wrath (with varying degrees of success), so perhaps readers can also imagine Noah doing the same. The story of Joseph narrates the preservation of "a remnant on earth" with "many survivors" (Gen 45:7, see also Gen 50:20) without any apocalyptic destruction at all, so perhaps readers can also imagine a less drastic solution than a genocidal flood to humanity's wickedness and violence. Just as the bow in the sky will interrupt God from again visiting the devastation of the flood upon humanity (Gen 9:14-16), so also the story of Noah and the flood presents itself to us so that we can wrestle with it, think it, debate its cost, but *not* replicate it!⁴⁴

Afterword

I am pleased to offer this exploration of the story of Noah and the flood as part of a volume honoring Dr. Erwin Buck. Dr. Buck, more than any other person, awakened in me an intense love of, and engagement with, scripture — not a blind love or a passive one-way engagement, but rather an active critical, historical, ethical and dialogical love and engagement in which scripture is good, not primarily to download and apply, but to think.

Notes

- ¹ This article is based on a talk first given at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary on September 19, 2007, and subsequently at Hope Lutheran Church in Calgary, and All Saints Anglican Church in Regina. The talk was accompanied by slides of various depictions of the Noah story in children's books and in art. Unfortunately, these slides could not be reproduced for this article.
- ² From the lyrics of "When I Get to Heaven" by rap artist Ice Cube on the album *Lethal Injection* (1993).
- ³ Hara E. Person and Diane G. Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth: Biblical Heroes in Contemporary Children's Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 57.
- ⁴ Lucy Cousins, *Noah's Ark* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1993).
- ⁵ Miriam Chaikin, *Children's Bible Stories from Genesis to Daniel* (New York: Dial Books, 1993).
- ⁶ Person and Person, *Stories*, p. 58.
- ⁷ "The concept of obedience is a central element to the story of Noah as it is central to the child-rearing concerns of many parents. In these picture book retellings of this story, Noah follows God's directives much as an obedient child would do. The primary question, whether about Noah or one's child, is how much obedience is essential to make one a 'good person'" (Person and Person, *Stories*, p. 86). See also Russell W. Dalton, "Perfect Prophets, Helpful Hippias, and Happy Endings: Noah and Jonah in Children's Bible Storybooks in the United States," *Religious Education* 102.3 [2007]: 303.
- ⁸ Dana Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 26.
- ⁹ This apocalyptic pattern embodies two of the topics of apocalyptic discourse identified by Greg Carey, *Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), pp. 6-10: cosmic catastrophe and dualism.
- ¹⁰ Standard surveys of the apocalyptic genre in the Hebrew bible typically investigate the book of Daniel and apocalyptic texts in the prophetic books but do not usually mention or attribute any significance to the Genesis story of Noah. Yet, from a canonical reading perspective (the reading perspective adopted to varying degrees by many biblical readers), the stories of Genesis, particularly those in chapters 1-11, are understood as setting the pattern for everything that follows. A recent example of this reading approach is Richard M. Davidson's *Flame of*

Yahweh (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), in which the determining pattern for a biblical theology of sexuality is set by the story of the primordial human couple in Genesis 1-3. Of course, from a historical critical perspective, many of these Genesis texts, especially those identified as stemming from exilic or post-exilic sources, would have been composed later than other biblical texts.

- 11 An article in *Time* magazine on a recent spate of apocalyptically-themed films, television shows, video games and books carried the intriguing sub-title “why we can’t wait for the end of the world” (Lev Grossman, “Apocalypse New. From *The Road* to *I Am Legend* to *Cloverfield*: why we can’t wait for the end of the world,” *Time*, January 28, 2008, p. 45). The article draws attention to the paradox of apocalyptic: on the one hand, a tragedy of intense suffering and wholesale destruction, but, on the other hand, “a fantasy of cleansing and regeneration wherein everything inessential and unauthentic is swept away so that we can build afresh among the ruins” (p. 47). Implicit in these popular apocalyptic presentations is the inclusion of the viewers/readers/users in the “we” that survives to rebuild, when, in fact, according to the apocalyptic pattern most of humanity perishes.
- 12 In his work on totemism, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously asserted that totemic animals are important not to eat but to think (*Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969], p. 162). In other words, the significance of totemic animals and their myths lies not in their utilitarian value as food but in their symbolic significance as indicative of the cognitive structures of a culture.
- 13 Brian B. Schmidt, “Flood Narratives of Ancient Western Asia,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, IV (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1995), p. 2337.
- 14 William W. Hallo, ed. *The Context of Scripture I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 513-515; Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” pp. 2339-40; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 45-50.
- 15 Hallo, *Context*, pp. 450-453; Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” p. 2339; Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: University Press, 1991), pp. 1-38.
- 16 Hallo, *Context*, pp. 458-460; Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” 2340; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 39-153.
- 17 Hallo, *Context*, p. 460.
- 18 Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” p. 2348.

- 19 Hallo, *Context*, pp. 404-416; Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” pp. 2341-42; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 282-315.
- 20 Schmidt, “Flood Narratives,” p. 2342, emphasis added.
- 21 In both accounts, the hero, knowing full well that the people will be destroyed, dissembles that he has incurred the displeasure of Enlil and so must leave in a boat in order that the people continue to receive Enlil’s blessings!
- 22 All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
- 23 The beginning of this verse could also be read “Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of the gods,” reading “Elohim” as a plural. Such a reading echoes the polytheistic Mesopotamian flood accounts.
- 24 Or “one who walks with the gods,” reading Elohim as plural again.
- 25 *I Enoch 7* and *Midrash Tanhumma* portray the animals as actively participating in the corruption of “all flesh” (James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], pp. 187-188).
- 26 In *1* and *2 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and other works, the “sons of God” are called “Watchers,” a term used to describe a type of angel in Dan 4:11, 20.
- 27 It is unclear who the mysterious “Nephilim” also mentioned in verse 4 are. Ancient interpreters tend to equate them with the offspring, who are pictured as giants (see Num 13:32-33 and the Greek translation of Gen 6:4 in the Septuagint).
- 28 The first creation account in Genesis 1 maps out a world in which everything — heaven and earth, dry land and water, animal and plant species, humans — has its proper place. The disruption of this cosmic order by divine beings who inappropriately mix with humans seems to be reflected in parts of the New Testament, such as 2 Peter 2:4-5 and Jude 6. These verses describe the punishment of angels who did not stay in their proper place but sinned by apparently transgressing the proper boundaries between the heavenly and the earthly.
- 29 Gen 8:22, with its poetic evocation of the enduring categorical binaries of seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night, seems to indicate that the cosmic balance has been restored after the flood.
- 30 Not surprisingly, most current versions of the Noah story for children omit this episode. See Dalton: 303.
- 31 In the Aramaic Levite Document, Levi’s priesthood is bestowed upon

him after his violent annihilation of the “workers of violence”, that is, the Shechemites (*CTLevi ar Cambridge Col. d. 15-19*; Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition, Vol. 1 (1Q1-4Q273)* [Leiden: Brill/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], p. 55). ... or “violence” is, of course, one of the reasons for the flood (Gen 6:11). Thus, Levi and Simeon’s genocidal extirpation of the Shechemites replicates God’s genocidal extirpation of “violence” from the earth. Henrik Drawnel, *An Aramaic Wisdom Text from Qumran: A New Interpretation of the Levi Document* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 314-16, draws attention to the Aramaic Levite Document’s reinterpretation of the story in Genesis 33 so that the “workers of violence” are no longer the perpetrators — Simeon and Levi (as in Gen 49:7) — but the victims, the Shechemites!

- 32 Martínez and Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition, Vol. 1*, 35. I am indebted to a presentation by Dorothy M. Peters of Trinity Western University on “Noah Traditions in the Hebrew and Aramaic Texts at Qumran” at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in June, 2007, for these connections
- 33 Roberto Totolli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur’an and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), pp. 21-23; Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London/New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 49-62.
- 34 All Qur’anic passages are quoted from the translation by Abdel Haleem (Oxford: University Press, 2004), unless otherwise noted.
- 35 For example, *Surah 71, the surah of N.h* or Noah, mentions no details of the story at all and consists entirely of Noah’s preaching.
- 36 Elsewhere, the Qur’an mentions also Noah’s wife as one of the unbelievers (66:10).
- 37 Michael Parsons, “The Apocalyptic Luther: His Noahic Self-Understanding,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44.4 (2001): 627-645.
- 38 New York: Crossroad, 1984.
- 39 St Louis: Chalice Press, 2005.
- 40 Given the focus on apocalyptic as a distinct genre in surveys of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, it is not surprising that the biblical story of Noah and the flood is not considered. But the emphasis here is on an apocalyptic pattern, a mode of thought that is not necessarily restricted to a particular apocalyptic genre.
- 41 David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2002) and *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*

- (Syracuse: University Press, 2005). Of course, Cook is not examining apocalyptic in the Qur'an but rather post-Qur'anic Muslim apocalyptic tradition.
- 42 New Testament passages explicitly see the story of the flood as prefiguring the apocalypse at the end of history: Matt 24:37-39, Lk 17:26, 2 Pet 3:5-7. In the Enochic literature, the flood is the "first end" analogous to the "last end" (*1 Enoch* 93:4; Dimant 1998: 135 Deborah Dimant, "Noah in Early Jewish Literature," *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, ed. Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), p. 135. The Qumran community applied the epithet "Plant of Righeousness" to both Noah and the righteous generation of the final age (Dimant, "Noah," pp. 135-136).
- 43 I am indebted to Danna Nolan Fewell for the notion of an interruptive reading strategy: "To interrupt means to question the story being told, to imagine the story being told differently, and likewise, to question one's life and to imagine life being lived differently" (*Children of Israel*, p. 34).
- 44 To rethink and resist the apocalyptic pattern may be characteristically Canadian. I recently came across Marlene Goldman's study (*Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* [Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005]) on how Canadian fiction writers tend to challenge the exclusion and violence of the apocalyptic pattern, especially by narrating the apocalypse from the perspective not of the saved but of the disenfranchised.