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The Flood Story in Middle English:
The Fourteenth-Century Alliterative Poem, *Cleanness*

David J.A. Clines

The fourteenth-century didactic work known as *Cleanness*, or *Purity*, is one of the finest examples of Middle English poetry.¹ It is a 1812-line alliterative poem extolling the virtue of cleanness, by which it means both moral and physical purity. It contains elaborations of three biblical stories as exempla (tales that inculcate a moral), portraying divine attitude to cleanness: the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar's Feast. The author is generally believed to have been the poet of the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a much better-known work than *Cleanness*), and a contemporary of Chaucer. The poem was written in the late fourteenth century, in a northwest Midland dialect of Middle English. It survives in a single manuscript, Cotton Nero A. x,² in the British Library, together with the other works of the Gawain poet.

The Flood narrative, together with the account of the corruption of the earth as told at the beginning of Genesis 6, and a concluding homily reflecting on the lessons of the Flood, occupies lines 249 to 600 of *Cleanness*.³ The purpose of the present paper is to explore some points at which *Cleanness* differs from its biblical prototype.

¹ The poem itself bears no title, and both *Cleanness* and *Purity* have been applied to it by editors. Since 'cleanness' (*clannesse*) is the very first word of the poem, it seems a little perverse not to use that as a title. For the present study, I have used the editions by Charles Moorman, *The Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), pp. 101-95 (with glossary); Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 5th edn, 2007), pp. 111-84 (with glossary). Quotations of *Cleanness* are taken from the online edition by Ian Lancashire at rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/cleanness.

The verse translations quoted are from Marie Borroff, *The Gawain Poet: Complete Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), pp. 33-107; her free vivacious verse translation reproduces effectively the flavour of the original's alliteration.

The prose translations cited in the footnotes are taken from the CD-ROM accompanying Andrew and Waldron's *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*.

² The 1,400 manuscripts collected by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631) included the Lindisfarne Gospels, *Magna Carta*, and the unique manuscript of *Beowulf*. Cotton is recognized as the first benefactor of the British Museum (and thus the British Library). The British Library retains his system of shelf marks, according to which each manuscript was housed in a case surmounted by the bust of a Roman emperor. The notation Cotton Nero A. x means that it belongs to the case surmounted by Nero, and is on the top shelf, the tenth manuscript from the left.

³ I have benefited from the following works especially: W.A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (London: Athlone Press, 1978); Lynn Stanley Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman, 1996); A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). For the place of *Cleanness* in the literature of its period, see James H. Morey, *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

1. *The Anger of God*

It is a feature of the poem *Cleanness* that God is depicted as having a special hatred of its opposite (*contrare*), namely uncleanness (*unclannesse*) or filth (*fylthe*). This hatred is foregrounded in the opening lines:

For wonder wroth is þe Wy3 þat wro3t alle þinges
Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe fol3es Hym after.

For the Maker of all things is irked beyond measure
When the folk of his following affront him with filth (lines 5-6).

The Flood called forth the divine anger to a hitherto unknown degree. In the scenes that precede the Flood narrative, there had been grave sins, which sorely displeased the deity, but which did not rouse him to anger such as that engendered by the *fylthe* of the generation of the Flood.⁴ For example, when the angels had rebelled and were cast out of heaven, his punishment of them was 'in the measure [i.e. moderation] of his anger, his mercy nevertheless' (*In þe mesure of His mode, His metz⁵ neuer þe lasse*, 215). And when Adam was punished it was all by measure and mercy that the vengeance was carried out (*Al in mesure & meþe watz mad þe vengiaunce*, 247). But never has the deity been so roused to anger as by the filth of the generation of the Flood:

Bot neuer 3et in no boke breued I herde
þat euer He wrek so wyþerly on werk þat He made,
Ne venged for no vilte of vice ne synne,
Ne so hastyfly watz hot for hatel of His wylle,

Ne neuer so sodenly so3t vnsoundely to weng,
As for fylþe of þe flesch þat folles han vsed;
For, as I fynde, þer He for3et alle His fre þewez,
& wex wod to þe wrache for wrath at His hert.

Never have I seen it set down in a book [elsewhere]
That He punished so impatiently the people He had made,
Nor avenged Him so violently on vice or on sin,
Nor so hastily did harm in the heat of His anger,
Nor so severely and swiftly sought to destroy
As for filth of the flesh that fools have practiced,
For then, I find, He forgot all His courteous forbearance
And maddened past relenting (*wex wod to þe wrache*, waxed angry to vengeance),
moved to take revenge (197-204).

⁴ Their *fylthe* seems to be essentially homosexuality, though there is also a hint of a breaking of boundaries by the sons of God who intermarry with human women in Genesis 6. Elizabeth B. Keiser notes how it is not until lines 695-96, after the story of the Flood and in the introduction to the exemplum of Sodom, that male homosexuality is explicitly identified as the *fylþe of þe flesch* (*Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and its Contexts* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997], pp. 44-45).

⁵ Taking the word as an error for *meth* or *meþe*, 'moderation, mercy' (as Moorman, *The Works of the Gawain-Poet*, p. 114 n. 215).

And a little later,

Per watz malys mercyles & mawgre much scheued,
Pat watz for fylþe vpon folde þat þe folk vsed,

Then was [God's] ill will (*malys mercyles*) unstinted, ire unrestrained,
Because the folk had fallen into filthy ways (250-51).

And his heart is touched by 'cruel afflicting anger (*felle temptande tene*)':⁶

... þat þe Wy3e þat al wro3t ful wroþly bygynnez.
When He knew vche contre corruppe in hitseluen ...
& vch freke forloyned fro þe ry3t wayez,
Felle temptande tene towched His hert.
As wy3e wo hym withinne, werp to Hymself:
'Me forþynkez ful much þat euer I mon made,
Bot I schal delyuer & do away þat doten on þis molde,
& fleme out of þe folde al þat flesch werez,
Fro þe burne to þe best, fro bryddez to fyschez;
Al schal down & be ded & dryuen out of erþe
þat euer I sette saule inne; & sore hit Me rwez
þat euer I made hem Myself; bot if I may hereafter,
I schal wayte to be war her wrenchez to kepe.'

... that the Author of all things grew angry (*wroþly*) at last.
When each country's corruption was clear in His sight,
And they that lived in each land no longer loved virtue
Then anger (*tene*) grew hot in the heart of our Lord;
Like a man mourning within, He mused to Himself,
'Much do I repent me that ever I made man,
But I shall wreak my revenge on all wrong-headed folk;
Of all creatures clad in flesh will I cleanse the world [lit. banish from the world] —
Both men and every beast, both birds and fish
All shall be doomed [lit. down] and dead and driven from the earth
That ever I set soul in, and sorry I am
That I myself made them; but if I may hereafter
I shall watch them well, and be wary of their tricks [or, deceitful deeds]' (280-92).

As the Flood comes and the animals and humans alike cry out for clemency, the divine anger is still on show:

þat amounted þe masse, þe mase His mercy watz passed,
& alle His pyte departed fro peple þat He hated.

But the maelstrom grew madder; His mercy was no more,

⁶ Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, p. 46, and Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*, p. 65, note the contrast between the deity's reaction to the fallen angels and to Adam and his response to the uncleanness of the generation of the Flood.

And his pity passed away from people that He hated (395-96).

This divine anger is not solely a feature of the divine character; it is experienced on earth in the savagery of the Flood, the terror implicit in the biblical narrative being heightened by the poet of *Cleanness*:

Thus *Cleanness* emphasizes more strongly than the Vulgate the terrifying violence of the forces unleashed against the human race. The flood gates are not simply opened (*apertae sunt*), but they burst ('torent'). Rain is no longer 'made' on earth (*facta est pluvia super terram*), but 'rushed to þe erþe'. The breaking of all the riverbanks (365), the shredding of the clouds (367), and the presentation of the Flood as a collision between earth and a world of water (371) are all nonbiblical, and contribute to the awesomeness of the poet's description.⁷

Nevertheless, the biblical story requires a further change of heart on the part of the deity beyond his decision to flood the earth: his scheme for the ark effectively amounts to a plan for the undoing of his will for the destruction of life on the planet, and the finale of the story will be a blessing, not a cursing, of humanity, even though it will remain just as wicked as it was before the Flood (Gen. 8.21).⁸ The transition from the original justified divine anger to the subsequent subversion of the divine decision to destroy the world and then to the unconditional postdiluvian blessing is one that is difficult to negotiate. On this matter, *Cleanness* follows the biblical sequence pretty closely, and has little of its own to contribute. God announces to Noah that he is about to destroy the whole world, and commands Noah to make himself an ark. He makes his covenant with Noah because righteousness and reason have always ruled Noah (*For þou in reysoun hatz reigned & ry3twys ben euer*, 328). God's undoing of his own original plan never rises to the surface either in the biblical text or in *Cleanness*, and the deity brings the Flood to an end simply when he thinks it good to do so:

Bot quen þe Lorde of þe lyfte lyked Hymself
For to mynne on His mon His meth þat abydez,
þen He wakened a wynde on watterez to blowe.

But when God thought it good, who governs the sky,
To make known to His man His mercy unfailing,
He wakened a wind over the wide waters (435-37).

When the dove returns to the ark with the olive branch, the poet remarks:

þat watz þe syngne of sauYTE þat sende hem oure Lorde,
& þe sa3tlyng of Hymself with þo sely bestez.

⁷ Ad Putter, 'Sources and Backgrounds for Descriptions of the Flood in Medieval and Renaissance Literature', *Studies in Philology* 94 (1997), pp. 137-59 (140).

⁸ I have discussed this point at length in my paper, 'The Failure of the Flood', in *Making a Difference: Essays on the Hebrew Bible and Judaism in Honor of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi* (ed. David J.A. Clines, Kent Harold Richards and Jacob L. Wright; Hebrew Bible Monographs, 49; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), pp. 74-84.

That was the sign of salvation sent by our Lord,
How He had reconciled Himself with those simple beasts (489-90).

Why just with the beasts? I do not know. Perhaps it is in prospect of the ensuing animal sacrifice that will be related in the coming lines. For it is 'when the beasts burned briskly and smoke billowed forth' (509) that he 'addresses His man in companionable kindness, with courteous words':

'Now, Noe, no more nel I neuer wary
Alle þe mukel mayny [on] molde for no mannez synnez.'

'Now, Noah', He said, 'nevermore shall I curse
All the mighty mass of earth for any men's sins' (513-14).

The deity's motivation for the turn to mercy is quite mysterious, as it is in the biblical narrative. But in the homily addressed to the reader (lines 541-600) that follows the Flood story proper the poet picks up the theme again, as if dissatisfied by his own narrative, and rehearses the rationale for the divine actions. Let us be clear, the poet seems to be saying, that

1. It was because human 'vileness and villainy had vanquished his patience' (544) that God 'sore repented that He had made human beings to inhabit the earth' (557-58); he became 'sorry that He had set and sustained them on earth' (561).

2. The result of this divine sorrow (more often in *Cleanness* it is divine anger) was that God inflicted on his human creation a dread disaster and chastised them harshly (542-43). 'Their fall into filth He fearsomely avenged' (559).

3. Thereafter he retreated from his own decision, sorrowfully recognizing that he had acted too severely: 'that He harshly had harmed them seemed hard to Him after'. So 'when sorrow assailed Him and softened His heart, He crafted a covenant to keep with mankind' (562-64). And he kept that covenant even in evil days after (569).

That is the logic of events in the mind of God as the poet sees it, but the effect of the poet's homily that concludes the Flood story is quite other than this more or less rational sequence. For the overwhelming emphasis of the homily is upon how quickly God can be angered. There are indeed a couple of lines on the 'mild magnanimity and merciful will' (565) of the deity, but there are at least 25 about the fierceness of his fury, his hatred of evil and his abhorrence of the wicked whom he harries from his kingdom. The depiction of his anger comes to a head with the lines,

Bot of þe dome of þe douþe for dedez of schame,
He is so skoymos of þat skape, He scarrez bylyue;
He may not dryȝe to draw allyt, bot drepez in hast:
& þat watz schewed schortly by a scape onez.

... when the folk fall into foul deeds of defiling lust,
He loathes so that lewdness, He lashes out at once,
Cannot bear to hold back, but abruptly strikes,
And that was openly proven by a punishment once (597-600).

With that, the homily concludes, and therewith the whole Flood episode in *Cleanness*.

The divine anger seems to be a new feature in this telling of the Flood story, since the scholastics denied that God could be moved by a human emotion such as anger.⁹ It is true that God also 'deeply regrets' (*sore hit Me rwez*¹⁰), a much milder term, but the anger is unmistakable.

In this respect *Cleanness* departs significantly from the biblical text, where it is remarkable how restrained the divine response is, emotionally at least; the violence of the universal cataclysm makes the detachment of the deity even more chilling than anger.

2. *The Experience of Humans and Animals at the Flood*

A striking feature of *Cleanness* is its sympathetic characterization of the humans and animals that are to be drowned in the Flood, in contrast to the biblical narrative, in which the victims of the Flood are given no subjectivity.

Per watz moon for to make when meschef was cnowen,
Pat no3t dowed bot þe deth in þe depe stremez;
Water wylger ay wax, wonez þat stryede,
Hurled into vch hous, hent þat þer dowedled.
Fryst feng to þe fly3t alle þat fle my3t;
Vuche burde with her barne þe byggyng þay leuez
& bowed to þe hy3bonk þer brentest hit wern,
& heterly to þe hy3e hyllez þay [h]aled on faste.
Bot al watz nedlez her note ...¹¹

They who marked the mischief lamented their fate,
That they were doomed to drown in the deep streams.
Torrents towered higher, toppled down houses,
Rushed raging into rooms where wretches harbored,
All fled at the first shock whose feet would serve them.
Women with children wended their way
To banks and bluffs that abode above water,
And all made for the uplands, where hills were highest,

⁹ 'The *Gawain*-poet is exceptional among medieval writers in portraying God as someone who is occasionally overcome with nausea and bouts of ill temper' (Putter, *Introduction*, p. 212). Nevertheless, the anger of the deity appears already in the Flood narrative as told in the twelfth-century versified *Bible* of Henri de Valenciennes: 'God was enraged, and showed his anger' (*Molt fu Diex correchiez, si mostra sa fierté*, line 210, quoted by Putter, 'Sources and Backgrounds', pp. 144-45). Against Spearing, I do not see that the phrase 'as a man (*As wywe*)' in line 284 is an express assertion that God felt in his anger like a man, since the phrase is evidently to be taken with what follows, his self-reflection.

¹⁰ That is, 'it sorely rues me', i.e. I sorely rue.

¹¹ In the prose translation of Andrew and Waldron: 'There was cause for lamentation when the calamity was known – that there was no help for it but to die in the deep streams; the water grew ever more powerful, destroying homes, rushed into every house, seized those who lived there. First, all who could flee took to flight; each woman with her child leaves the house and went to the high ridges where it was steepest, and quickly they hastened to the high hills. But their efforts were all in vain ...'

But their efforts were futile ... (373-81).

Whereas the biblical narrative does not linger for a moment on the annihilation of all living beings, the poet imagines the Flood 'no longer as the apparently instant cause of death of the Old Testament, but as a remorseless and painful process'.¹² In *Cleanness*, Putter remarks, 'human beings and animals can see the Flood coming. It chases people out of their houses and pursues them as they climb up the mountains. Even there the water soon rises to their feet, and men and women prepare for death in a final grand and selfless gesture.'

Bi þat þe flod to her fete flo3ed & waxed,
þen vche a segge se3wel þat synk hym byhoued.
Frendez fellen in fere & faþmed togeder,
To dry3her delful deystyne & dy3en alle samen;
Luf lokez to luf & his leue takez,
For to ende alle at onez & for euer twynne.

When the swift-swelling flood swirled around their feet,
Not a soul but saw he must sink and be lost;
Comrades crowded round and clung to each other
To endure the dire doom that destiny decreed;
Lover looked to lover in last fond farewell,
To end once for all, and ever be parted (397-402).

Equally remarkable are the sympathies of the poet of *Cleanness* for the animal creation, whose fate and dismay are portrayed with no less tenderness than that of the humans:

Syþen þe wylde of þe wode on þe water flette;
Summe swymmed þeron þat saue hemsself trawed,
Summe sty3e to a stud & stared to þe heuen,
Rwly wyth a loud rurd rored for drede.
Harez, herttez also, to þe hy3e runnen;
Bukkez, bausenez, & bulez to þe bonkkez hy3ed;
& alle cryed for care to þe Kyng of heuen,
Recouerer of þe Creator þay cryed vchone.

The wild things went to water, when woods were drowned;
Some set out to swim, in search of safe harbor;
Some, stranded on the steeps, stared up to heaven
With heart-rending roars that reechoed afar;
Hares and harts hastened to the high ground;
Bucks, badgers, and bulls beset the steep banks;
All called, confounded, on the King of heaven
Cried out for clemency to the Creator of all (387-94).

¹² Putter, 'Sources and Background', p. 141.

In a comparable vein, the raven sent out by Noah is given its own subjectivity. Though it is a creature that is by nature 'unruly, rebellious at heart', as its coal black colour no doubt signifies, and though its selfish failure to return to the ark is judged harshly, it too has feelings and desire (for unclean carrion, as is only hinted at in the Bible at Gen. 8.7):

... he fongez to þe fly3t & fannez on þe wyndez,
Halez hy3e vpon hy3t to herken tyþynges.
He croukez for comfort when carayne he fyndez
Kast vp on a clyffe þer costese lay drye;
He hade þe smelle of þe smach & smoltes þeder sone,
Fallez on þe foule flesch & fyllez his wombe,
& sone 3ederly for3ete 3isterday steuen,
How þe cheuetayn hym charged þat þe kyst 3emed.
þe rauen raykez hym forth, þat reches ful lyttel
How alle fodez þer fare, ellez he fynde mete.

... he speeds into space on outspread wings,
Hovers high in heaven, intent to learn tidings.
When he came upon carrion, he croaked for joy,
That had drowned and drifted up on a dry ledge.
The stench smells sweet to him; he swoops down at once,
Falls on the foul flesh, and fills his belly.
He has dismissed from his mind the command that came
From the mouth of the man who was master of the ship.
He keeps his own course, concerned no whit
Whether all creatures starve, so his craw be stuffed (457-66).

The obedient dove, by contrast, though much praised by Noah, and though beautifully pictured taking 'her turn in the weather on taut-webbed wings' (*Ho wyrle out on þe weder on wynges ful scharpe*, 475), and resting at last, one evening, on the bow of the boat with a branch of olive in her beak, 'graced all with green leaves that grow from the stem' (488), is, perhaps surprisingly, accorded no such subjectivity.¹³

The last scene in the Flood story is given wholly to the animals. Noah has offered sacrifice, God has promised in 'courteous words' never again to 'curse all the mighty mass of earth for any men's sins' (512-14), and in a mere two lines has sent Noah forth from the ark to 'grow great, beget many heirs' (521-12). The climax to the narrative is however the 12-line depiction of the animals leaving the ark and spreading out over the landscape:

þerwyth He blessez vch a best, & byta3t hem þis erþe.
þen watz a skylly skyualde, quen scaped alle þe wylde,
Vche fowle to þe fly3t þat fyþerez my3t serue,
Vche fysch to þe flod þat fynne coupe nayte.
Vche beste to þe bent þat þat bytes on erbez;
Wylde wormez to her won wryþez in þe erþe,

¹³ The dove is, however, focalized in line 483 where it 'skims over the seascape and scouts all about'.

þe fox & þe folmarde to þe fryth wyndez,
Herttes to hy3e heþe, harez to gorstez,
& lyounes & lebardez to þe lake-ryftes:
Hernez & hauekez to þe hy3e rochez,
þe hole-foted fowle to þe flod hy3ez,
& vche best at a brayde þer hym best lykez;

Then he blessed each beast, bade them overspread the earth.
Wittily [i.e. knowledgeably] through the wide world the wild things scattered:
Each fowl took to flight on well-feathered wings;
Each fish sought out seas, where fins served best,
The livestock found level lands where lush grass grew;
The long snakes glided into lairs under ground;
The fox went to the forest, the fitchew [polecat] as well;
Harts to the highlands, hares to the thickets,
And lions and leopards to the rain-lashed canyons.
Eagles and hawks to the highest rocks,
The web-footed fowl to the fresh-flowing streams,
And each beast abides where best he may prosper (528-39).

As a pendant to this discussion of the poet's sympathy with the humans and animals caught up in the Flood, I mention his depiction of the ark itself, which is treated almost as a living creature, another victim of the deluge:

þe arc houen watz on hy3e with hurlande gotez,
Kest to kythez vncouþe þe clowdez ful nere.
Hit waltered on þe wylde flod, went as hit lyste,
Drof vpon þe depe dam, in daunger hit semed,
Withouten mast, oþer myke, oþer myry bawelyne,
Kable, oþer capstan to clyppe to her ankrez,
Hurrok, oþer hande-helme hasped on roþer,
Oþer any sweande sayl to seche after hauen,
Bot flote forthe with þe flyt of þe felle wyndez.
Whederwarde so þe water wafte, hit rebounde;
Ofte hit roled on rounde & rered on ende;
Nyf oure Lorde hade ben her lodezmon hem had lumpen harde.

The ark was hurled about by heaving waves,
Carried close to the clouds in countries unknown.
It wallowed on the wide sea, went where it would,
Drove over the deep, in danger, it seemed,
Without boom crutch, or mast, or bowline made taut,
Cable or capstan to secure their anchors,
Helm to keep a course, or hand-held tiller,
Or any swelling sail to speed them to harbor,
But floated forth, flogged on by furious winds,
From each buffet of the brine it rebounded in turn;
Often it rolled round and reared up on end.
Had the Lord not been their helmsman, their lot had been dire (413-24).

It is a surreal picture, the 'buoyant box' (*þat lyftande lome*, the heaving vessel, 443), lacking every feature of a proper ship—without boom crutch, mast, bowline, cable, capstan, anchors, helm, tiller, or sail—carried by the waves over strange lands (*kythez vncouþe*) and upwards, 'close to the clouds' (*þe clowdez ful nere*, 414), and rearing up at the last on its end, a primeval Titanic. The ark, no less than the drowned humans and animals, suffers at the hands of the divine *malys mercyles* (line 250) that brings on the Flood.

By comparison with the ark itself, the survivors of the Flood, Noah and his family, are not subjects of much interest to the poet. Noah is introduced as a dutiful servant of the Lord:

Penne in worlde watz a wy3e wonyande on lyue,
Ful redy & ful ry3twys, & rewled hym fayre,
In þe drede of Dry3tyn his dayez he vsez,
& ay glydande wyth his God, his grace watz þe more.

Now one man there was in the world at that time
Ever ready to do right, and ruled himself well.
In dread of the dear Lord he disposed his days,
And as he walks with his God, he wins the more grace (293-96).

God gives him elaborate instructions for building the ark, in a 37-line speech, and Noah 'briskly ... set about to obey God's behests' (line 341). The Lord checks with him whether 'each seam [is] made seaworthy, sealed well with clay' (line 346), and Noah replies, 'Yes, Lord, by your leave ... I have worked by your word and wit you lent me' (lines 347-48). Only one scene featuring Noah and his family comes alive: when the dove returns,

þen watz þer joy on þat gyn where jumpred er dry3ed,
& much comfort in þat cofer þat watz clay-daubed.
Myryly on a fayr morn, monyth þe fyrst,
þat fallez formast in þe 3er, & þe fyrst day,
Ledez lo3en in þat lome & loked þeroute,

Then bliss was in the box where before all was gloom,
Much comfort in that cabin that was clay-daubed.
Merrily one fair morning—the first month it was,
That falls foremost in the year, and the first day,
They laughed in that little boat, and looked all about (lines 491-95).

But the writing in the scenes about Noah and his family is mostly stilted. There is no hint of the Noah who usually figures in painting and carving and mystery plays of the late Middle Ages: the boat-builder, the hen-pecked husband, the simple and honest man.¹⁴

¹⁴ The point is made by Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*, p. 65.

3. Cleansing

It is a surprising aspect of the biblical Flood narrative that the deluge is never represented as a washing or cleansing of the earth. The water of the Flood is viewed solely a means of annihilation, not of cleansing. The word *rāḥaṣ* 'wash' does not occur, and even the word *māḥâ* 'wipe out', which occurs four times in the Flood narrative (Gen. 6.7; 7.4, 23 [*bis*]), does not suggest a washing or a wiping clean. It is indeed used in 2 Kgs 21.13 for wiping a dish clean, but that seems to mean removing the last crumbs of food from it rather than washing it.¹⁵ The term *māḥâ* in Genesis refers to destroying or annihilating the world.

The rather obvious gap in the biblical narrative (that is, the question why it should be a flood of water that is used to punish the earth) is filled by *Cleanness*. The obverse of cleanness being filth (*fylthe*), it would seem evident that the Flood should be seen as a washing away of the filth of the antediluvian world. *Cleanness* does not develop the theme extensively, and it makes only three explicit connections between the Flood and washing. Nonetheless, the connection must have been fundamental to the poet, for why else would he have chosen to illustrate the theme of cleanness with the story of the Flood?

The first connection between washing and the Flood occurs in God's address to Noah announcing the sending of the Flood:

... I schal waken vp a water to wasch alle þe worlde

... I shall waken up a water to wash all the world (323).

Nevertheless, there is no explicit connection at this point between washing and the filth that is to be washed away. It was twenty lines earlier in his address to Noah that he gave 'filth' (*gore*) as his reason for sending the Flood, and there was no verbal connection there with washing:

With her vnworþelych werk Me wlatez withinne;
þe gore þerof Me hatz greued & þe glette nwyed.

The sight of their unseemliness (*vnworþelych werk*, shameful conduct) sickens me within;

The great glut of their grossness (*þe gore þerof*, the filth thereof) grieves me sore (305-306).

¹⁵ That will fit well with the next clause about turning the plate over, which indicates satiation (so too Mordecai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB, 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988], p. 269). I think Luis Alonso Schökel is incorrect in thinking the dish is being wiped 'with the help of water' ('מִמַּיָּא *māḥâ*', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, VIII [ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. Douglas W. Stott; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], pp. 227-31 [228]). In Prov. 30.20 the verb *māḥâ* means to wipe the mouth clean of food. In Num. 5.23 *māḥâ* is explicitly associated with water: the curses against an unfaithful wife are written by a priest on a scroll and then 'wiped off' into water. The words are not washed off *by* the water, however, but apparently scraped or rubbed off *into* the water that the woman will have to drink (NJPS 'rub it off into the water of bitterness'; RSV, NRSV, NAB, NIV, NJB and REB have 'wash off', wrongly in my opinion).

The second reference to washing is however more explicit. As the Lord instructs Noah to enter the ark, he warns him that after seven days he will begin the Flood:

I sende out bylyue
Such a rowtande ryge þat rayne schal swyþe
þat schal wasch alle þe worlde of werkez of fylþe

I shall swiftly dispatch
A tempest so terrible, such teeming rains
As shall flood away the filth that infects the world
(lit. that shall wash all the world of works of filth) (353-55).

The third reference comes near the beginning of the homily that concludes the Flood element in *Cleanness*:

Forþy war þe now, wy3e þat worschyp desyres
In His comlych courte þat Kyng is of blysse,
In þe fylþe of þe flesch þat þou be founden neuer,
Tyl any water in þe worlde to wasche þe fayly.
For is no segge vnder sunne so seme of his craftez,
If he be sulped in synne, þat syttez vnclene;
On spec of spote may spede to mysse
Of þe sy3te of þe Souerayn þat syttez so hy3e.

Wherefore beware, you who wish for a worthy place
In the company of the court of the King of bliss,
Lest filth of the flesh infect you so deep
That no water in the world can wash it away.
For though a man's demeanor be much to admire,
If he be steeped in sin that has stained his soul—
One speck or one spot of aspect foul
Can hinder us from beholding the King high enthroned (545-52).

Here the poet deviates from the more obvious sense of the Flood as washing to envisage a filth so deep that no water in the world can wash it away. He does not appear to be thinking of the divine promise that the world will never again be invaded by a universal Flood, but has narrowed his vision from humanity in general to the individual human, who can be at risk of incurring filth that is incapable of removal, worse, then, than the filth of the antediluvians. No, it is far worse than that: one does not need to be deep-dyed in filth, or steeped in sin to bring upon oneself the divine wrath; even having 'one speck or one spot of aspect foul' (*on spec of spote*, 551) can be enough to deprive a person of the sight of the 'king of bliss' in his 'fair court' (*comlych courte*, 546).

By this point, it is not too easy to see just what the moral of the Flood story is, according to the poet of *Cleanness*. If the dreadful wickedness and filth of the generation of the Flood brought upon them the destruction of their world, and necessitated the washing clean of the whole world, where stands one speck or spot in comparison? Presumably to be shut out from the court of the King of Bliss is an even worse fate than being drowned in a Flood, so perhaps our poet

thinks that the generation of Flood got off lightly: they had the freedom to sin on a massive scale before they had to be annihilated, whereas the reader may expect to suffer a worse fate for a trivial speck or spot.

What is at issue in the present paper is, however, no more than the conceptualization of the Flood as the washing away of sin. Our poet, though no doubt much indebted to some predecessors, does not appear to have derived this element from any of them and may be credited with this important innovation in the history of reception the Flood narrative.

Conclusion

From the point of view of biblical scholarship this study has reinforced the conviction that engagement with alternative realizations of biblical narratives can bring fresh light to the study of these almost over-researched texts. In three respects *Cleanness* has offered us a new insight into how the story of the Flood can or could be told and thus into the specificity of the biblical narration.

In the biblical text, God is grieved by human sin; in *Cleanness* he is angered. In the biblical text, the Flood is divine punishment and the impact on the animals and humans who drown in it is not of consequence; in *Cleanness* their subjectivity comes to the fore and their reaction is depicted on a scale that raises an implicit challenge to the justice of the divine decision. In the biblical text, the water of the Flood is, strangely, never conceived of as a cleansing agent; in *Cleanness*, though its washing function is referred to only three times, the fact that the Flood story serves as one of the three biblical exempla of cleanness shows that this is the principal significance of the narrative for the poet.

The differences between the hypotext (in this case, the biblical narrative) and the hypertext (in this case, *Cleanness*) are no less important for the understanding and interpretation of one text than for the other. The story of the Flood in *Cleanness* can of course be read for itself, without regard to its background; but a new level of appreciation for the poet's work and its distinctives is gained by comparing with its biblical antecedent. And the character of the Flood story in the biblical narrative is indelibly altered by reading it again after *Cleanness*: what biblical interpreter can then fail to notice (as interpreters generally have done in the past) the cold determination of the deity, the disregard of the experience of the victims of the Flood, human and animal, and the surprising absence from the narrative of the idea of 'cleanness'?