

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 15

The Flood Narrative (Gen. 6-9)

E. Flood Story

1. The Extent of the Flood
2. The Duration of the Flood

We begin our discussion of Genesis 6-9, the flood story, and we had discussed 1. under E., which is, “The extent of the flood.” 2. is where we pick up, which is, “The duration of the flood,” and just a very brief comment there. You read in chapter 7, verse 11, “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.” So it’s the seventeenth day of the second month of Noah’s six hundredth year. In Genesis 8:14, you read that in the second month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, the earth dried. So on the 27th day of the second month of the following year, the earth was dry enough to again be inhabited. So you have one year plus 10 days. Now there’s been a lot of discussion of this that I’m not going to get into in detail. Questions like, was the writer speaking of a solar year or a lunar year? If you want to know the exact number of days, we’re, of course, used to a solar year system. Most ancient cultures went on a lunar year. That would make some difference in the total number of days. But in any event, it’s approximately one year. Ten days longer than a year. So again, as we discussed in the last class, however, this wasn’t a normal annual flood. This was something of a magnitude that was unparalleled.

3. The Cause of the Flood

3. on your sheet is, “The cause of the flood.” I want to spend a little bit of time discussing the cause. I think you find that specified in chapter 6, verses 5 through 8, where you read that “God saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart, and the Lord said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the earth: both man and beasts and

creeping things and fowls of the air, for it repenteth me that I have made them.” Now, that’s a very strong statement about the wickedness of man being the cause of God’s judgment. If you reflect on the verse of Genesis 6:5, I think you see the way the superlatives are piled up, you might say. The intensity of the evil was great. The wickedness of man was great. The intensity of evil was great with the inwardness of the evil. Every imagination of the thought of his heart was evil. The inclusiveness of the evil: it’s *every* imagination of his heart. The exclusiveness of the evil: it was *only* evil. And then the continuousness of the evil: all the day. King James says “continually.” Literally in the Hebrew it was “all the day.” So you see its intensity, its inwardness, its inclusiveness, exclusiveness, and continuousness. If you look over in 6:12, you have another comment on the evil. If you look down a few verses further at 6:12, “God looked upon the earth and behold it was corrupt for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.” And then 8:21 says, “I will not again curse the ground for man’s sake, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” In other words, the evil is congenital; it’s not learned. Something subsequent to the fall that is characteristic of man as man. He has a sinful nature. He is evil from his youth. So when we speak about the cause of the flood, it’s the wickedness of man. God had let that go, as it were, unchecked, up to this point and then the judgment comes in the form of the flood.

4. Sons of God and Daughters of Men – Gen. 6:1-4

Now, chapter 6 of Genesis and those verses, particularly verse 5, but verses 5 through 7, which speak of the reason for the flood, are preceded by a passage that has caused a lot of discussion with respect to interpretation. That’s the one you read about in Vos, where there is the marriage of the sons of God with the daughters of men. 6:1-4. I think what you have in Genesis 6:1-4 is an illustration or example of the kind of wickedness which the Lord is speaking of when you get to verse 5. Now let’s read 6:1-4. “It came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth and daughters were born unto them that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair, and they took them wives of all whom they chose, and the Lord said, ‘My spirit shall not

always strive with man for he is also flesh, and his days shall be 120 years.’ And there were giants in the earth in those days. And so when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men, who were of old men of renown.” Now, of course, the question is, what is being described here? What was the wickedness or sin involved in this relationship between the sons of God and the daughters of men?

a. Mythological Approach

There have been a number of viewpoints that have been developed. The first is the mythological idea, which is characteristic of critical scholars who assume that particularly the book of Genesis has a lot of mythological legendary material simply incorporated from extra-biblical material. The idea is that divine beings were enticed by the beauty of earthly women, entered into marriage with them, and then gave rise to a race of gigantic heroes of antiquity, people of great power and strength. The idea is this isn't something that actually happened, it's just a mythological sort of tale. I think our view of the Old Testament excludes that as a possible understanding of what's happening.

b. The Angels View

The second view is much more common, particularly common in the early church, and not altogether discarded today and that's the idea that the sons of God is a reference to angels, spiritual beings, and that they entered into a physical relationship with women. The offspring of this union were the mighty men, the Nephilim that are described in verse 4. Now, I'm not convinced that this is the best view, and it seems to me that there are some objections that are rather serious. The first is, in verse 3, the punishment is to men, not angels. In other words, if it's angels who were the violators of their proper position and entered into this relationship with women, you'd expect the judgment to be on angels, not on men. Whereas you read in verse 3, the Lord says, “My spirit shall not always strive with man, and his days are numbered, it's only going to be 120 years before

the flood,” and the judgment comes on *them*. Secondly, angels are not mentioned either here in the immediate or even in the broader context. You wonder how you would abruptly have this reference to angels if that’s what it’s intended to be. Thirdly, and I take this from William Henry Green. William Henry Green was professor of Old Testament at Princeton seminary in the early part of the twentieth century. I think I mentioned him earlier. He was the one who interacted with Wellhausen in the days when Wellhausen’s theories were first deemed profound and being followed. And he’s an excellent scholar. But he says, “The concept of angels being able to enter into sexual relationship is totally foreign to Hebrew thought” and he feels that there’s no basis in Scripture to verify that this is something that is even viewed as possible. Then he notes Jesus’ statement that in heaven we’re like the angels, neither marrying nor being given in marriage. Angels don’t seem to be sexual beings from what the Scripture says. So I’m not so sure that this is a view that merits serious consideration. Those who have adopted this view usually appeal to Jude, verse 6, And you read there, in Jude 6, “The angels who kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness until judgment on the great day.” The idea is that Jude 6 is connected with this passage and the reference in Jude 6 to angels leaving their own habitation is angels leaving heaven to come to earth to enter into this relationship. I’m not so sure in the connection of the context of Jude 6 that the leaving of their first estate and their own habitation is to be understood as something spatial. I think it’s more the idea that that’s the domain of their operation that the Lord had given them to. I’m not sure that that’s something to be understood as spatial, but the sphere of power of operation delegated to them, and they chose to step outside and beyond that, when Satan revolted and others went along with him. So I’m not so sure that the Jude 6 passage really even relates to this passage, but that’s usually the text that’s appealed to in order to support this angel view.

c. The Sethite View

A third view, which probably is the most common view you come across today, is the one Vos advocated, and others as well, and that is, that the sons of God and the

daughters of men are equivalent to the Sethite and the Cainite lines. And those two lines have been contrasted previous to this in Genesis. We looked at that in our last class hour. The Cainite line characterized by ungodliness and wickedness; the Sethite line, by godliness. The sin, then, is mixed marriage between godly and ungodly. So the idea is that the Sethite line is not able to preserve its identity as this godly line, except for the house of Noah, there was the exception, but generally it has been swept along with the ungodly people. The interesting thing is, as the two lines are mixed, the initiative comes from the god-fearing line, because it's the sons of God, the Sethite line, who, it says, "when they saw the daughters of men, they were fair [that's the Cainite line] they took them wives of all whom they chose." So the initiative comes from the God-fearing line, as they see the attractiveness of the Cainite woman.

Now, I think there are some problems with this view as well. I think the major initial problem is that it forces the Hebrew term, for those of you who have had Hebrew, *ha'adam*, which is the word for men/mankind. It forces *ha'adam*, or men, to be understood in two different senses in verse 1 and verse 2. See, you read in verse 1, "It came to pass when men, *ha'adam*, began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them." Well, men there, it seems quite clearly, refers to mankind generically, as man began to multiply. When you come to verse 2, you read, "The sons of God saw the daughters of *ha'adam*, the daughters of men." And there, you're forced to say, under this view, that *ha'adam* means the Cainite line specifically. Just one class within mankind. That means you must take *ha'adam* in two different senses, in two succeeding verses. I think you can really question whether there's a justification to do that in the flow of the statements. It seems much more likely that what is being said is, "It came to pass when men began to multiply, men generally, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men generally. They were fair and they took them wives of all whom they chose." It seems that the daughters of both verses are identical. The men are the same. You see you have daughters mentioned in 6:1, "It came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, daughters were born to them." Men multiplied, daughters were born to them. "The sons of God saw the daughters of men." Aren't they

the same daughters? So that is a problem, I think, with this viewpoint.

The second question that can be raised with this interpretation is why should the offspring of these marriages, that is a mixed marriage between a godly and ungodly line, why should the offspring be the *Nephalim* and *Giborim*. Those are transliterations of the Hebrew for the giants in verse 4. There were giants, that's *Nephalim* in the Hebrew. And then the last part of the verse, "They bore children to them; the same became mighty men," that's *Giborim*, who were both men of renown, or men of the name, more literally "men of the name." Why should the offspring of a mixed marriage be these kinds of individuals? I'll come back to discussing these terms in more detail when we look at our fourth view. And that's the divine kingship view.

d. Kingship View

There are two articles there which are also on your bibliography. On your bibliography, page 10, about two-thirds of the way down, we have the article by Kline in *Westminster Theological Journal*: "Divine kingship in Genesis 6:1-4" and LeRoy Burney, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 6:1-4" in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* in 1970. The basic thesis of this view is that the sons of God is better translated "sons of the gods." *Elohim* is plural, it could be translated singular or plural, depending on whether you take it as a reference to the God of Israel or to Hebrew deities. It's better translated "sons of the gods" and interpreted in connection with the ancient Near Eastern idea of divine kingship. So what would be referred to here is pre-flood kings. The sons of the gods were human beings who were kings, but they're designated here as sons of the gods. The daughters of men would simply be daughters of men in general and the sin is polygamy.

Now let's look at that as the basic thesis. In Burney's article, page 47, he discusses the widespread custom of referring to kings as the sons of various gods. And he said that in Egypt the king was called the son of Re, the sun god. The Sumero-Acadian king was considered the offspring of the goddess and one of the gods, and one strictly referred to the king as the son of the gods. The Hittite king was called the son of the weather god.

The title of his mother was “mother of the god.” In the northwest semitic commonly, the king was directly called, “the son of the god.” The god was called the father of the king. The text refers to the gods as the king’s father and says the king is the son of Baal or the son of god. Thus, on the basis of Semitic usage, the term *bene ha’elohim*, the sons of the god, or sons of the gods, very likely refers to dynastic rulers, on the basis of evidence from ancient Near Eastern customs generally. The daughters of men would be just daughters in general. The sin was polygamy.

You notice in verse 2, “The sons of god saw the daughters of men were fair. They took them wives of all whom they chose.” They took them wives of *all* whom they chose. And the question there is how do you understand the preposition “of”? In the Hebrew, the preposition, those of you who have had Hebrew, is *min*. “They took them wives *of* all whom they chose,” *min*, translated here “of.” Now, the normal interpretation is to take that *min*, or “of” as partitive. They took whichever they chose, in other words, without regard to spiritual status or anything of that sort. They took whichever they choose. That would be the idea of the previous view, the mixed marriage view. The understanding of the *min* or the “of” in this divine kingship view is that it is an explicative, even all that they chose. They took wives of in the sense—even all they chose—they took as many wives as they wanted. It’s not the partitive idea, but it’s an explicative idea, “as many as they chose.”

Now, contextually that has some basis because you go back to Genesis 4:23, “Lamech said to his wives,” plural. We know that Lamech had more than one wife. Also, you have in 6:1, “It came to pass when men began to multiply or to become numerous on the face of the earth.” Perhaps this polygamy was connected with the multiplication of population. That’s a bit more remote. But then to go a bit further, if this is the explanation of what the sin was, polygamy, then the issue was, divine kings taking as many wives as they wanted. You also have an explanation for the use of these terms in verse 4, “The *Nephalim*, *Giborim*, men of the name, the offspring of these unions were these mighty men.” They were these princes in these households of these kings who had power and were recognized as that. The term *Nephalim* which is translated “giants” is a very

difficult term to translate. The etymology is disputed. If you look the term up in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*—I don't know if you're familiar with these two volumes—edited by R.K. Harrison and Bruce Waltke, which lists Hebrew words, and then gives articles discussing meaning and use. Now, see it is a term that is very elusive as far as pinning down its meaning. Maybe gigantic stature is part of the circle of meaning, but it seems that the strongest sense is it's probably this idea of a warrior type of person. It's hard to nail down. That's why the NIV doesn't even translate. Okay, well that's the basic idea for this divine kingship understanding of what was happening in Genesis 6:1-4 and what the sin was.

Violence Factor

So now the mythological view, I don't really consider as a viable one, but of the other three, you have the idea that the sin is, sexual intercourse between angels and women, or it's a mixed marriage thing between godly and ungodly people, or it's this polygamous relationship of these so-called divine kings—these leaders of these city-states that produce this violent warrior class of princes that have terrorized the surrounding people. Read verses 12 and 13, “God looked down upon the earth, behold it is corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with violence through them.’” There you have reference to violence: “The earth is filled with violence.” That violence related back to these *Nephalim*, *Giborim*, men of the name, possibly. Now this text is a difficult text. I think it is very hard to be dogmatic and say there's only one of these possible understandings that is the correct one. And I think I've tried to give you a basic idea of the three, and I'm not going to push one or the other. My own inclination is toward the last one, the divine kingship view. Obviously there are instances in Scripture where angels take on the form of human beings. That's true. But then it is a large next step to say that they were capable or interested in sexual relationships with human women. This would be the only instance of that in Scripture, if it is that. It's possible. I wouldn't rule it out and say it's not possible.

5. Historicity of the Flood

Alright, let's go on to the time of the flood. I'm not going to say much about that. That's number 4. We've discussed that earlier, and I've mentioned it several times, the only way you can establish the time of the flood is by using the genealogies. Actually you would have to use the genealogy, not Genesis 5, but you would have to begin with the genealogy in Genesis 11 because the reason is you've got to work back from fixed points chronologically which you really start with in the kingdom period of Israel. You've got to work back from the time of the exodus, and from the exodus back to the patriarchs, which you can do roughly. And then you see you'd have to take Genesis 11 from Abram back to Noah and use the genealogy of Genesis 11 and say, here the flood was at such and such date. We discussed that earlier, that it just can't be done. In fact if you add those figures, you only have 292 years between the flood and Abraham, and there's so much that had to have transpired, and there's so much historical data that we know about that doesn't fit there, but we're left with concluding there have to be gaps, which is characteristic of biblical genealogies generally, so there's no way you can fix that date.

All right. 5. Is, "The historicity of the flood." What I want to talk about here is the whole question of the origin and character of the biblical flood story. I don't think we can question that the biblical account is intended to be understood as telling us about something that really happened: a historical event. Elsewhere in Scripture the flood is referred to in the sense of something that happened. Matthew 24:37 says, "But as in the days of Noah, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days that were before the flood, they were eating, drinking, marrying, being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away, so also shall the coming of the Son of Man be." That comparison or analogy certainly presumes that the flood was something that actually happened. In Hebrews 11:7, you read, "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, ruled with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house." Then in 2 Peter 2, you read that "God spared not the old world but saved Noah, the eighth person and a preacher of righteousness,

bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly.” Chapter 3 of 2 Peter, again you have an allusion, “By which the world that then was being overflowed with water, perished.” So it seems clear that the Bible represents this as something that actually happened.

Babylonian Flood Stories

Against its historicity, many people have utilized related stories among other peoples, particularly the Babylonians, and because of the resemblance between the biblical story and the extra-biblical stories, the conclusion has been drawn that the biblical story is just a modified version of the Babylonian story. I’m sure you recall Finegan’s statement to that effect, on page 36. Finegan says, after discussing the Babylonian flood story, “Such is the ancient flood story of Babylon, which was purified of its polytheistic elements, and survived among the Israelites. The two sources are now woven together into a single moving story in Genesis 6:5 to 9:17.” And he says quite matter-of-factly, that the biblical story simply is an adaptation of the Babylonian story. The Babylonian story is said to have arisen from a particularly serious river flood, which was embellished and remembered in the way in which we now find it. So if you take that viewpoint you certainly jeopardize the historicity of the biblical story.

Now, the striking thing is, when you compare the biblical and the Babylonian flood stories, the striking thing is that there are many similarities. In fact, the skeleton, you might say, of the two stories is pretty much identical. Now I’ve tried to outline that with these eight points. In both the biblical and the Babylonian story, you have, a great flood taking place and taking almost all human life. So first is, “A great flood takes almost all human life.” Secondly, a few people are spared, along with some animals, by means of a ship. You find that in the biblical story and you also find it in the Babylonian story. Thirdly, the people in both the biblical story and the Babylonian story are made to know beforehand by divine revelation of the danger to come. Fourthly, the divine instruction was to build an ark or boat. Fifthly, this ark or ship had several stories to it, in both accounts. Sixthly, the ship came to rest on a mountain at the end of the flood.

Seventhly, the people in the ship ascertained the conditions outside by releasing several birds. That's a rather striking way of determining that, but it's done in both accounts. Then eighthly, the people offered a sacrifice to God after release from the ship. So if you take those elements, which are the primary elements of the story, you find those primary elements in both accounts. Now there are variations. You have the similarity in structure, but a lot of variation in detail. I'll illustrate that in a few minutes, but you not only have the same structure of variation and details, you also have various versions of Mesopotamian flood stories.

You have a Samarian version, in which the hero who would correspond to Noah in the biblical story is a man named Ziusudra. You have the Gilgamesh epic, which Finegan discusses in some detail, in which the hero corresponding to Noah is Utnapishtim. And then there's another version of an Acadian Babylonian type of story, called the Atrahasis epic in which Atrahasis is the hero of the story. So there are a number of versions of the Mesopotamian flood story. Basically, they all have the same structure, although this structure that I have repeated here is taken from the Gilgamesh epic primarily. We must conclude there must be some kind of relationship, if you have that kind of a structure, that is so close in the biblical and the extra-biblical material, there must be some kind of a relationship.

Differences between the Biblical and Babylonian Flood Stories

Before looking at that question, though, let me give you an idea of how I said you have the same structural relationship but differences in detail—one detail was just mentioned, the cube in the Gilgamesh epic, which isn't in the biblical story. But let me give you some illustrations of similarities and differences. Let's start with that—start with the ark. The similarity is the hero of both stories is told to build a great ship, by means of which he would be delivered. Both accounts give details of size and construction, including the use of bituminous material to make it water-tight. Both of them talk about that. But then, as far as differences are concerned, in the Gilgamesh epic, Utnapishtim said he provided his boat with six decks. And then he divided the floor

space into nine sections. It was also provided with the door and at least one window. Now if you compare that with the biblical story, Noah's ark had three stories. You see that in Genesis 6:16, where you read, "When you shall make the ark, in a cubit shall you finish it above, and the door of the ark shall you set inside thereof, with lower second and third stories shall you make it." So you have six stories in the one, and you have three stories in the other.

If you look at the dimensions, Genesis 6:15 says the ark was 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, 30 cubits high--300 long, 50 wide, 30 cubits high. That's Genesis 6:15. If the cubit corresponds to the distance from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow, it's about 18 inches, which is generally the way that's calculated, the ark was about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, 45 feet high. It's a good-sized boat, that's longer than a football field. 75 feet wide, 45 feet high. Displacement of 43,000 tons. It's interesting that modern ship-building follows the same proportions as the length, width and height that you find in the ark. But you compare those dimensions with Utnapishtim's ship in the Gilgamesh Epic. His boat was an exact cube, as was mentioned here, measuring 120 cubits on a side. In the Barosis account of the Mesopotamian flood, his ship was 3,000 feet long and 1200 feet wide. So there you get into these astronomical kinds of numbers. But my point is, you have striking similarity, and here he's told to build this boat, but then surrounding that similarity are points of difference. There are many differences in detail. Every point that you take going down through here, you'll find the same sort of thing. Pointing at similarity, but many aspects of it in detail that differ.

I see I'm over time. I'll give you a few more illustrations of that at the beginning of next hour, and then we'll discuss, what do we do with the similarity? How do we explain the similarity?

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