

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 7, Noah and the Flood, Part 1, Gen. 6:9-9:29

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews and his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 7, Noah and the Flood, Part 1, Genesis 6:9-9:29.

Session seven concerns Noah and the Flood account, and we might begin by asking the question, why is it that so much attention by the author of Genesis is given to the Noah and Flood episode? It's the longest narrative in the opening chapters of verses one through eleven.

You'll find that chapters six and seven are preparatory for the commissioning of Noah, and then the building of the ark, and then the falling of the rain. In chapter eight, we have the receding of the floodwaters, concluding chapter eight with the disembarking of the Noah and family, and then Noah builds an altar, and he worships the Lord, and the Lord provides an assurance that never again will the earth be destroyed by floodwaters. So, chapters six, seven, and eight are about the rise and then the descent of the flood.

Chapter nine also falls under the heading, these are the generations of Noah, and chapter nine then is God's covenant that he makes with Noah and all the creatures of the earth. So, we have these many chapters given to Noah. Also, we'll find that the author is very interested in the details regarding the flood.

Now, when you consider this, you have to conclude that in the mind of the author, Noah, and the Flood was an excellent example of what he is teaching and what his theological and worldview are. So, we find Noah and the Flood a very good example of the thesis presented by the author of Genesis regarding the universal history of the family in Genesis 1 through 11. That is the whole notion that God has a blessing for humanity and that he will bring about this blessing as he commissions and enables the human family to carry out the blessing of chapter one, verse 28, where God says that the human family is to procreate and they are to exercise dominion over the earth.

Now, there are, however, threats to that blessing, and as a consequence of rebellion in the garden, murder by Cain against Abel, and then the trajectory and rise of human wickedness that becomes so pervasive and so intense that now this flood is required. So, the judgment of God falls upon the human family because of the wickedness that will prevent it and threaten God's good purposes for the human family. And this is going to be coupled, however, with repeatedly from the garden again, Cain and Abel, with the garden account, they are promised a deliverer.

They are prepared for life outside the garden. And then, outside the garden, we find that although Abel, the righteous offspring of the family, is murdered by Cain, there is the replacement of Seth. And what follows chapter four is chapter five's genealogy of the Sethites.

And there, although we have the ongoing refrain, and then he died, giving a conclusion to each one who's in the Sethite genealogy, there is Enoch who walked with God and was translated without experiencing death, which was a reminder that God has a blessing of life for the human family. If they will live in conformity with our fellowship, walking in the moral ways of God, then we find that chapter six, verses one through eight, has been a critical passage in bridging between the genealogy found in chapter five and then the account of the flood that follows. The reason why that is such an important bridge between the two is because it describes the intermarriage between the descendants of Cain, the rebellious, wicked lineage, and the offspring, the righteous lineage of the Sethites.

Boundaries are crossed, and the outcome is the pervasive wickedness that characterizes that era in the time of Noah. Following this, then, we find the description of Noah, who stands out in his generation. So this gives us the backdrop for understanding that in the midst of appropriate judgment against the wickedness and violence of humanity that has developed toward greater and greater perversity and destruction of the human family, God chooses, then, to bring to pass a merciful preservation of the human family that he loves, and whereby he can continue his progressive plan of salvation through the offspring of the woman, as it's recounted for us in chapter three, verse 15, promise for the human family.

That ray of light in the midst of the darkness, the overwhelming darkness of sin and violence that takes place, is going to be through Noah. So, we have these parts, then, that make up this long and detailed narrative because it fits so well with the overarching theological message of Genesis 1 through 11. We will notice the reversal that occurs in this narrative, which has a literary arrangement.

It speaks to the theological underlying thesis. The literary would be how God takes creation and reverses it, uncreation, and then steps in and restores his creation. Now, there will be changes, and I'll speak to these in a moment.

So, if we look at the arrangement, the waters overwhelm creation and uncreation, and the language that's used speaks of how God uncreates what he had created in chapter one, and then he steps in and recreates. If you look at the literary arrangement, then you can think of how chapters six and seven have to do with the commissioning, the building of the ark, and then the rising of the waters, that peak. And if you'll think of an ascent, say, to a mountain in your mind, Mount Ararat, and then it reaches the peak, and then it's reversed because there's a recession of the waters and a drying of the ground.

And so that the remnant that God saves is as it disembarks and then worships the Lord out of a spirit of thanksgiving. And then, from out of Noah, his three sons will produce a whole new progeny that will live under the blessing of God, after which will be named in chapter nine, the covenant that God makes. And the promises are renewed, and the assurances that God gave Adam and Eve in the garden are restated.

After this, you will find that there is a section, chapter nine, verses 20 through 29, that describes Noah's drunkenness and the curse blessing he invokes regarding his sons. So, it does not end on a happy note, and it certainly does not begin on a beginning note, but the structure of the story does tell us that God has a plan and that God is superintending this plan, and he's going to bring it to a happy conclusion when we continue to read through the book of Genesis because there is hope. Now, the time span of when this flood takes place is about a year.

In chapter seven, verse 11, it tells us that Noah and his family entered the ark, and then in chapter eight, verse 13, we are told that they exit the ark, and the specifics then are designed to speak to the momentous events regarding the flood. Now, the ark itself is about 150 yards long and about 25 yards wide, and it's made up of three stories. You might think of it as a floating rectangular barge that was designed to ride out the storms.

It was a prison of freedom, safety, and liberation, strangely, because it was a prison during this long year, but at the same time, it protected them from the waters. What we find then is, if you think in your mind about such a structure, it has no captain except that of God. There's no sail.

There's no rudder. It's all in the providential sovereign care of God, who oversees the survival of Noah and the family. It may help you, since we know sports as an analogy, that the length of it, 150 yards, is about the length of a football field and a half.

Now, because of the length and the detail and the challenges that this narrative account concerns interpreters, and how important it is to the book of Genesis, we'll probably deal with this narrative in two parts. So, session seven today is part one. Session eight will conclude our time, and that is the session that follows.

I think we would do well for a sidebar here, an aside that would talk about the relationship of ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, how we are to interpret them in light of the biblical parallels, and how they can inform us and yet be a prism through which we read the biblical account, but rather giving us supplementary information. Let's start then; if you have a map, what would be very helpful is an atlas, and perhaps in the back of your Bible, you will have a series of maps. I'm going to speak first about Israel's world.

Israel's world. If you can imagine the Mediterranean to the west and then to the east, you will have the Mesopotamian nations. Mesopotamia itself means the land of the two rivers, referring to the tigers in the Euphrates.

As early as the third millennium BC, there was a group of people with a highly elevated civilized nation, the Sumerians, and I want to say that carefully because I'm not talking about the Samaritans that are described in the New Testament. The Sumerians are not named in the Bible. Subsequent to them came the people remembered as the Akkadians, and then next followed the invasion of the Amorites, and the greatest king of the Amorite peoples, you may have heard of him by his law code, the laws of Hammurabi, and he reigned about 1800 BC.

Well, as you can see, by virtue of the third and second millennia, there was instability in that region of the Tigris-Euphrates, the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Amorites, and then as we move into the first millennium, you have the Babylonians and the Assyrians. So, all historians agree that this region was probably the birthplace of civilization, just as it is presented in the Bible. Now, that's to the east, and then to the south of Israel is, of course, the great peoples of Egypt, the Egyptians.

The difference between the Egyptians and the Mesopotamian people groups would be, with regard to their socio-political life, the near uniformity of Egyptian rule in that region in the early millennia because the Nile provided much more stability and the solidarity of Egyptian regimes. The Egyptian Nile then provided a much more secure and predictable source of food. The Bible speaks of how groups such as Jacob and his sons descended into Egypt in order to buy food and how important it is that Joseph was instrumental in securing a future source of food and stability that became available to a number of different groups who migrated to Egypt to purchase and to live.

So, the Egyptian dynasties were, for the most part, fewer in its ethnic regimes. When you think of Israel itself, and we can use the ancient name, Canaan, it falls between these two great powers, and that would be the Syria-Palestinian region, Syria-Palestine. If you imagine what has been known as the Fertile Crescent, this is the agricultural land that is, ones that could, these areas that could sustain civilizations.

And it's like an arc or a crescent. If you start at the Tigris-Euphrates in the east, and in your mind go northwest and descend south through Syria and Palestine into Egypt, that's the crescent, that's the arc of earliest civilization. And therefore, you can see that ancient Canaan was an important bridge between the powers of the north, such as the Hittites in the northeast, as we said about the Assyrians and Babylonians, and then the Egyptians in the south, a very important land bridge.

So, any one of these great powers that controlled that region would have an advantage socially and politically in controlling this ancient Near Eastern fertile landmass. So, within that area of Israel, there is not one uniform people group during the time of the biblical occupation of ancient Canaan and later Israel. Especially you'll notice that in Genesis and then in the Torah as a whole, we have various ethnic groups: the Hittites, the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Philistines, and others.

There were numerous city-states in other words, not a uniform empire, such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, but here we have small kinglets. And these various kings at times during the long history of the third and second millennia, B.C. of course, at times they showed independence and interdependence within themselves, and then at other times they were subject to the Egyptians or the Mesopotamians. So, these city-states dotted the land of Canaan.

And the lifestyle would have been in these city-states urban, and around them the walled cities of their reign and rule were the common people. The way in which the patriarchs lived and those like them would be what sociologists today call dimorphic in their lifestyle. Di, D-I, meaning two morphic forms, two forms of how they drew their sustenance provision in life.

What are the two forms? We see this reflected in the lives of the biblical patriarchs. On the one hand, we find that they are migrating and roving peoples, and this has to do with their shepherding. They would also take up residence in local cities for the patriarchs.

You will find that Hebron was a very important place for Abraham. So, that's the lifestyle of the patriarchs, and you'll find that ongoing throughout the patriarchal history. Now, let's talk about what these civilizations said about creation in early human history.

And we want to pause, as I said earlier, and think about the method that we should employ when it comes to learning from the civilizations of the ancient world. And what is very commonplace when it comes to methodology is to compare and contrast, to see the similarities and the dissimilarities. Now, this can be deceiving because, although you may have a lot of commonalities or, on the other hand, a lot of dissimilarities, what's more, important than these details, which in fact may be incidental, is the fundamental underlying worldview that each group has.

And in the case of these various other people groups, what is dominant in their ideology would be how they are given to nature religions, and this would be how the various gods in their polytheism control spheres or regions of the created order, such as the sky and the underworld. I think the best way then to understand is to see then not a direct borrowing from one culture to the other, but rather a universal common memory, say, of the flood account, and that the biblical account then will provide for

the reader a reliable account of what the flood concerned, and then deriving from that you will have the differences and then the common similarities between the stories. It would be like understanding the culture, you might say, furniture and how we can draw on the background without being enslaved to how the other cultures described and understood creation and the great flood.

It might be like this: most people who have some education will know about Charles Darwin's origin of species and his theory of biological evolution. However, very few who would be able to give you some very brief description of what is found in the origin of species have never read it. And I would say the same for the readers of the first accounts of early human history in the reading of Torah, and that is that there is not a necessity to have a direct link, but rather an indirect link between Israel's account of human history and what we find in the other creation accounts and the great flood.

One thing that we need to differentiate is the language that is used in our culture regarding myth and, for example, legend. Sometimes, we confuse these terms, and we don't always have an accurate understanding of a myth. We may think of myth as a fantasy story.

Let's start with myth and then I'll speak of legend. Myth, for many people, is just a story that's not true, that's fictional. That is designed for entertainment.

There is something much more important at work when it comes to myth in describing the ideology and the theology of ancient peoples, and that is that a myth was indeed an account describing the gods and the created order in human life. And the purpose of the myth is to show that the gods were instrumental in developing and sustaining not only nature, which we immediately think of, but also the various social and government institutions which were essential in the life of the ancient human family. So, when it comes, as you may know, there is a coterminous relationship between a god and nature, the material and the physical.

So, you would have, for example, the gods of, say, the gods that are named in each culture for the sun, the sun deity. In Egypt it is Re, R-E. And it was understood that the god of the sun is what gave the sun its animation, its life.

And so, as a result, the sun itself, governed and controlled by the deity, is therefore divine. And that's how ideologically the sun, for example, could be worshipped. Most of these creation narratives involve what was antecedent to the gods.

In other words, the creation or source of the gods themselves is called a theogony. And so, as a result, in order to favorably control hostile or beneficial aspects of nature when it came to worship, it was given then to an attempt on the part of the

people to control the deities by showing favor to them. Now we have in Egypt, for example, and we'll start there, with creation accounts.

There is no systematic theology of creation. There are a variety of explanations for how the gods were created and, in turn, how they created the universe. The one I wanted to mention first is Atum of Heliopolis.

Atum, A-T-U-M. He is the creator god. The single source from which all emanates emerges from his being.

And you remember when we talked about creation, I differentiated, as the Bible shows us, that the teaching of creation is that God spoke creation into existence and that he and creation are independent entities. In other words, creation is not divine, and he, that is God, is not dependent upon creation, but rather all creation is dependent upon him, not as an emanation from his being, but rather being declared by his authoritative word into existence. Now, when it comes to Atum, he is depicted as a primeval hill that emerges from the pre-creation waters, a little hillock, if you want to think of it, surrounded by these primeval waters, and he actually brings himself into existence.

In other words, he does have a beginning, whereas the Bible tells us that God never had a beginning. He is eternal. And so, by sneezing, or spitting, or masturbating, I come from Atum, this hillock, the lesser gods.

Here's a quote from Atum. He says I am the one who made me. It was as I wished, according to my heart, that I built myself.

There is another theological perspective found among the Egyptians from Memphis, as opposed to Heliopolis. It's called the Memphite theology, and it also depicts a pre-existent force, always an impersonal force. And this force in Egypt is named Ptah, P-T-A-H, which is the intellectual principle.

Speech, as long as it is understood, reflects this intellectual principle. And by using magical words, Ptah produces the universe from the primeval hillock, or monad. This monad, meaning one, is a single entity, namely Atum.

Now the connection with biblical Genesis is superficial, when we consider that this is magical speech versus a God who controls the language, as opposed to words manipulating God. When it comes to the creation of man in Egyptian perspective, it is rather consistently understood to be from the making of clay, in the shaping of clay, which does remind us of chapter 2, verse 7. There is one depiction of a deity sitting at a potter's wheel, forming man, and then the goddess gives breath into the nostrils of the man, which will remind you of Genesis. Interestingly, whereas the

Genesis account gives you so much detail regarding the creation of the woman, in Egyptian literature, there's not much interest in the creation of women.

Now, let's move to Mesopotamia, which also produced a great deal of mythological material. The best-known creation is Enuma Elish. I'll spell that for you.

E-N-U-M-A, Enuma, and then Elish, E-L-I-S-H. The account describes two primeval waters. The male primeval water is Apsu, A-P-S-U, Apsu, and the female is Tiamat, the salt water, T-I-A-M-A-T.

These are the male and female waters that of course speak to the cohabitation of waters. And there is a deity figure who murders Apsu, and Tiamat then as a consequence decides to retaliate, so she and her demonic forces gather under the king, I should say the general, Kingu. And therefore there is this battle that ensued against the murderous gods who killed Apsu.

And there's a great war that emerges between Tiamat's demonic forces and then the gods. But they have to find within the pantheon of gods a god who will stand in their behalf and do battle with Tiamat, and that is the patron deity of Babylon, Marduk. He does battle with Kingu and Tiamat, defeats them, and as a reward Marduk receives a palace and is the king of the gods.

You can see how this would be a way in which to deify, to justify the great king of Babylon and the social structure of a king and then his subjects. So, the ideology of kingship is sustained by that is the life of the gods and therefore is justifying such an order to life in Babylon. So, the king of Babylon then was understood to be under the protection and provision of Marduk.

How was man created? Well, from Kingu who was killed by Marduk came from his blood and clay a figure, a slain god who was the source of humanity, the man. Now, there is the heaven and earth dimension, and that is how Marduk slayed Tiamat like a clam. So, the top half of her body is the heavens and the is the idea of a myth that presents a universal truth and that perpetuates that truth as having the fundamental basis for all of nature and all of how men and women are to live in coherence with and dependence upon the gods.

Now when it comes to creation in the Canaanite region of the ancient Near East, you will find that the chief idea is that of a cosmic battle. Now there isn't any sustained creation myth when it comes to Canaanite culture. There is a proposal on the part of many scholars that the myth regarding the battles between the gods of chaos and the gods of cosmos resulted then in something of a creation ideology.

El was the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, and he was the god of over 70 sons, one of which is certainly known from the Bible, well known from the Bible, and that

is Baal, B-A-A-L. He is the one who is seen as the active god, the god of rain, and the god of fruition. Therefore, he is a very likely deity of the 70 sons of El to stand on behalf of the cosmos, bringing about, after defeating the gods of chaos, a sustainable life order whereby humanity can exist.

And so, the best known account of this battle is between Baal and the waters, Yam, in Canaanite and also in Hebrew Y-A-M-M, Y-A-M-M. Now, what are we to understand when it comes to the creation account? And that is often what you will find is that the worldview presented in Genesis shows a really an opposition, even polemical, to the worldview of the ancient Near East in terms of the creation of gods and goddesses. And especially important, as I remarked in an earlier session, is the difference in the motivation.

The motivation for the Lord in this creation is out of his love, out of his goodness. In 1 John chapter 4, verse 8, we are told God is love. And then we are told that this has been expressed concretely in giving his son in 1 John 4 verses 9 through 10.

And here it says in verse 9 that herein, see by this we know the love of God, not that we loved him but that he loved us first. And now, how did he demonstrate that? He sent his son as an atonement, a propitiation for her sins. Now, let me say a word about the flood event.

Let's look at what we find in the Mesopotamian tradition. It has the most developed concrete idea of the great flood event. And this is known as the Epic of Gilgamesh.

And the 11th tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh describes how Gilgamesh, as a semi-divine figure, is seeking eternal life. And he has heard of a figure who received immortality from the gods. And this person I'm about to name, this god I should say, and person, is Noah's counterpart.

He is the Mesopotamian Noah, so to speak. And his name is Utnapishtim. Shall I spell it for you? Ut, U-T, rather U-T, N-A-P, nap, Utnapishtim, I-S-H and then T-I-M.

So U-T-N-A-P-I-S-H-T-I-M. There is another account of this in an Epic of Gilgamesh parallel. And it actually takes us from creation down through the flood, just like we find in Genesis 1 through 9. Its name is Atrahasis.

Atrahasis, A-T-R-A-H-A-S-I-S, H-A-S-I-S. Now, in Atrahasis, we will get a motivation for why there is this great flood. And the motivation on the part of the gods was how the humans were disturbing the sleep of the gods.

So, what was needed was the destruction of these noisy humans, and hence, the flood was designed. There were actually a series of attempts to remove the noisy humans, but the flood was the most effective. Now, there is a linkage between life

and death, and the Epic of Gilgamesh clarifies this, as I was saying, that Upnapishtim receives immortality.

Gilgamesh sojourns to find him and asks how he came by it. There, he comes to understand that it was a once-unrepeatable event and that he could not have immortality. But Upnapishtim gives Gilgamesh a gift, and it's a plant.

It's a plant in the waters. And so, Gilgamesh retrieves the plant. It's a plant that was designed to regenerate Gilgamesh or the partaker of the plant because although it would not give you immortality, it would restore your youth.

Sadly, there is a serpent, and that immediately makes you think of the Genesis account that steals the plant and robs Gilgamesh of its possession. So, when you compare that to Genesis, you find that the basis for what occurs in the flood account is a moral degeneration. And here is the grave difference.

It is God who creates for the benefit of humanity, and when we find that humanity falls into grave immorality, God must act with the flood. Whereas the flood stories that you will find in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Atrahasis, there's also a Sumerian flood account from the ancient Near East. This all has to do with the way in which humanity serves the interests of God, and therefore, it's reversed from what you find in Genesis.

Returning now to our account of the biblical flood, let's look at some of the literary features that you will find in the account. And these literary features are important. Let me begin with, and certainly, I won't name all of them; let's talk about chapter 6, verse 18.

But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark, you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. So, there's a naming then of eight humans, and this covenant is not only with Noah, but the whole Noah family. This is the first time that the word covenant occurs in the Bible.

It's best to think of a covenant as the one we'll discover with the Abraham covenant, then later the covenant made with Israel, the Mosaic covenant, and then the new covenant found in Jeremiah 31. These covenants are not transactions but rather speak to a relationship. And the relationship in mind here will be, of course, God and the Noahic family and how the covenant is stipulated with promises of blessing and preservation.

Then, in chapter 9, the details of the contents of the covenant are discussed. Another thing that you'll find in the flood account is the repetition of words and the repetition of these numbers. So, you'll find the repetition of sevens, the expression 40 days and nights, and the repetition of 150 days.

And so, what does that have to do then with the advantages of that kind of repetition in constructing a narrative of this kind? And that is its emphasis on the cohesion and symmetry of the flood account. And how that repetition is not the result of two or three different sources that have been patched together, but rather that it is speaking to one coherent story, and the repetitions of giving the narrative structure symmetry tells us that all of this is under the sovereign control of God. And then as I mentioned earlier, we have echoes of creation, uncreation, recreation, and there are word plays.

Here is one: the word Noah, and in Hebrew, it's pronounced Noah, Noah. When you look at chapter 8 verse 4, what you will discover is that with chapter 8 verse 4, it tells us that the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. That word rest sounds like Noah.

It comes from the Hebrew root word nuach, nuach, nuach, and indeed Noah is the one instrumental in giving rest to an ongoing legacy of human life. And there are important connections that are taking place, with the Torah. The one I had mentioned on the day of our first session is the word play on ark.

The word ark is found in one other passage besides the flood account, and that is the Hebrew word that is translated as basket in Exodus 2, verses 2 through 5. The construction of the ark and the basket are similar. Both are in the waters and are rescued from the waters. In the case of baby Moses, it was the waters of the Nile, and in the case of the flood, of course, it is the flood waters.

So I think that what we can learn from this is the importance of recognizing that in the flood account, we have a clear proclamation in a number of ways that God is the captain of the floating rectangular barge and the hope of a new creation is in the confines of this ark, this construction used by God to preserve a family and preserve a family that will emerge and be in Noah, the new Adam from whom will come all people groups. So, when we look at the superscription in verse 9, in the description of Noah, he was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Here we have a description of a man who by faith lived a moral life compared to his counterparts, and then he was a man who by faith built this ark at the instruction of the Lord.

The message then having to do with Noah and the flood account tells us centrally that when it comes to the family of humanity, God gives the reader hope that God is the one who is superintendent. There is a passage that's found in chapter 7 that makes this quite clear, and we'll read verse 16 where it speaks of the animals going into the ark were male and female of every living thing as God had commanded Noah, then the Lord shut the door. He's the one who shut Noah and the new world into the safety net of this ark that Noah has built under the instruction of the Lord.

Session 8 will be part 2, Noah and the Flood.

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