

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Genesis, Session 16, Podcast Audio

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, let's get right into it. Today we're going deep on flood narratives, but not just the one you probably know. Right, we're going way back, even before the biblical account.

Think Mesopotamia, like really ancient stuff. We'll be using a lecture by Old Testament scholar Robert Vannoy to help us unpack it all. And we'll be talking about Noah and the flood, sure, but also that whole business with the curse on his grandson, Canaan.

Yeah, it's a story that's been misused and misunderstood, so we want to handle that carefully. Definitely. So, first things first, before the Bible was written, there were already flood stories circulating in Mesopotamia.

Absolutely, we're talking about the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Atrahasis epic. And even older Sumerian myths too, right? Right, they all had these flood narratives in place long before the biblical account. And when you compare them, it's kind of wild how much they have in common, structurally at least.

Yeah, you've got the warning of this huge flood coming, a chosen guy who's told to build this big ark. Gather up the animals, two by two. The flood hits, wipes everything out, and then they send out birds to check if it's safe yet.

It's like the same blueprint, but then there are these little differences that make you go, huh, that's interesting. Like the names are different. Zizudra, Utnapishtim, Atrahasis.

Versus just Noah, keeping it simple. And sometimes it's not just a family on board; there are whole groups of people in the Mesopotamian versions. Craftsmen, extended family.

It's not that tight-knit group like in the Bible. But okay, this is what really gets me: the birds. Oh, here we go.

The bird debate. Seriously, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim sends out a dove, then a swallow, and then a raven, of all things. What's wrong with that? If I'm looking for dry land, I'm sending my toughest bird out first.

Noah at least got that right: raven first, then the doves. You know, you're echoing the scholar Alexander Heidel there. He pointed out how Utnapishtim's bird order doesn't seem very logical.

The raven's the one built for that post-apocalyptic landscape. So how do we make sense of all this? It can't just be copying, right? Definitely not a straightforward situation. Scholars have come up with a few explanations.

Lay a mommy. Well, one idea, not super popular, but interesting, is that the Mesopotamian stories came from a proto-Semitic source. Proto-Semitic.

Basically, imagine there's this really old language ancestor to both Akkadian... The Mesopotamian language. Right, and also Hebrew, the language of the Bible. So maybe there's this original flood story in that lost language.

Okay, so it's like you find a Shakespeare play, but it's in German. Doesn't mean Shakespeare was German, just means it got translated. Exactly.

The source could be somewhere else entirely. Yeah. Problem is, there's zero proof of this proto-Semitic source.

Just a theory. Okay, fun to think about, but probably not the answer. The simplest explanation is the Hebrews just straight out borrowed the story from Mesopotamia.

Makes sense. It was around. But then why change so much? Names, numbers of people, bird order.

Why not just copy it exactly? Yeah, like if you're covering a song, you keep the basic melody, but you add your own spin. Great analogy. Which leads us to the third explanation, which a lot of scholars find convincing.

Hit me. Both stories come from a way older shared tradition. Older than Sumerian old.

Maybe even could be based on some real catastrophic flood. Oh, so like there was a massive flood, and the story got passed down and changed over time. Like a giant game of telephone, each retelling adds a little something different.

I can see that happening. This was the view of a big name in biblical studies, Gerhard von Rad. But he added his own wrinkle to it.

Oh, of course he did. Scholars love a good mystery. He thought the Israelites encountered a separate Canaanite flood tradition when they entered Canaan, on top of the older one.

Double flood myth action. But again, no proof, right? Right. More of an educated guess.

But even if there was this super old flood, does that mean it was literally worldwide, like the stories say? That's where things get tricky. Von Rad himself knew that scientists have a hard time explaining a global flood. Yeah.

Geographically, it's a tough sell. So the flood myth spreads like wildfire. But does that mean it happened exactly as the story goes? Not necessarily.

OK, good point. So it's like we have all these flood myths around the world. Think of it like those magic flight folktales.

You find them everywhere, different cultures, but the plot's the same. Someone running from a monster, throwing stuff behind them; it magically becomes obstacles. Right.

Anthropologists think these stories spread through contact, not just direct copying. So one group tells another, it gets changed, travels further. And the flood myth could be similar.

Doesn't automatically mean it was one event, historically. But you got to wonder, right, if a story's that universal, maybe there's some truth to it, even if it got exaggerated. Absolutely.

The fact that it resonates with so many cultures is fascinating. Yeah. Makes you think about deeper meanings beyond just the literal events.

Well, I think we've made it through the flood itself. Now the real fun begins. Safe to say, the waters have receded.

But that doesn't mean our deep dive is over. Yeah, we're just getting to the good stuff. Covenants, rainbows.

And that curse on Canaan, which we need to handle really carefully. Definitely. Let's start with something a little more hopeful, though.

After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah. And not just Noah, but with all living creatures. No more destroying the world with a flood.

It's a promise. A pretty big promise. And the rainbow's the sign of that covenant.

Right. It's interesting, though. Does the text say anything about rainbows having a special meaning before the flood? Hmm.

Good question. It's not totally clear, actually. But from this point on, it becomes this symbol of God's faithfulness.

And there's this little detail I love. When the rainbow appears, it says God remembers the covenant. Ah, so it's not like we need the reminder.

It's God. Right. It's a way of expressing God's faithfulness in human terms.

Anthropomorphism, we call it. So God doesn't need reminders, but the story uses that imagery to get the point across. Exactly.

And theologically, it's huge. The earth is safe now. It's the setting for God's plan to unfold.

Flood's over, new beginning, time to get to work. But of course, with these stories, there's always that darker side. And that brings us to the curse on Canaan, Noah's grandson.

Yeah, this is where things get tricky. This story has been twisted to justify some awful things throughout history. Slavery, segregation.

We got to be careful here. Absolutely. You included work by anthropologist J.R. Buswell III in your sources.

He does a great job of showing how those interpretations are just wrong, historically and logically. Good. Glad to have that cleared up.

But before we get into the why of the curse, can we back up a sec? What did Ham actually do that was so bad? The text isn't exactly crystal clear. You're right. It's a bit vague.

One interpretation, and scholar Carlin Derricks leans this way, is that Ham basically disrespected his dad. So Noah was drunk, passed out naked, and Ham... Instead of covering him up, he went and told his brothers, like broadcasting Noah's shame. So a lack of respect, maybe even finding it funny.

Kind of messed up. Definitely not a good look. But then there's this phrase in the text: what his younger son had done to him.

It makes you wonder if it was something more than just seeing him naked. I've heard some people suggest it was sexual assault, but I don't think that's really supported. Yeah, we got to stick to the text, not add our own ideas.

But even if we take it at face value, there's still the question: why curse Canaan, the son, and not Ham, the one who messed up? Yeah, that doesn't seem fair. Any ideas? One possibility is that Noah, maybe through divine insight, saw something in Canaan that reminded him of Ham. Like the same bad traits, but amplified.

Could be. As if Noah sensed that whatever was wrong with Ham would continue in Canaan. Which is interesting, because later in the Bible, in Leviticus, it talks about the Canaanites being condemned for their practices.

Right. Abominable customs, it says. Defiling the land.

So maybe Noah saw that coming, that pattern of behavior, even if it wasn't fully present in Canaan yet. Remember, these ancient texts are working on different levels. There's the surface story, but also these deeper meanings, almost prophetic.

Okay, so Canaan gets the curse, but his brothers, Shem and Japhet, they get blessings, right? What's the deal with those? Okay, we're back, and we're wrapping up our flood narrative deep dive. We've gone from ancient Mesopotamia to the Ark, the Covenant, that tricky curse. And now we're looking at the flip side, right? The blessings that Noah gives to his other sons, Shem and Japhet.

It's almost like these blessings are a roadmap for how different groups of people will relate to each other going forward, kind of setting the stage for history. It's fascinating, right? Like how these ancient stories tried to make sense of the world and shape it at the same time. So first up, Shem.

What does Noah say about him? Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. Right away, you see that connection between Shem and the God of Israel. Laying the groundwork for the chosen people idea.

Exactly. And then there's that second part, may Canaan be the slave of Shem. Okay, yeah, there it is.

That hierarchy, that power dynamic. It's definitely uncomfortable to read from a modern perspective. No doubt.

It reflects the values of the ancient world. Not something we endorse, but it's there in the text. We've got to acknowledge it.

Understand it, not condone it. Okay, so Shem's lineage is favored, linked to God. What about Japheth? What's his blessing? Noah says, may God extend the territory of Japheth.

May Japheth live in the tents of Shem and may Canaan be his slave. So for Japheth, it's about expansion, spreading out, claiming land. Right, like God's going to make his territory huge.

But that part about living in the tents of Shem, that's kind of ambiguous, isn't it? Yeah, for sure. Is it peaceful? A sharing of resources? Or is it more like taking over? You've got scholars arguing both sides. Some see it as peaceful coexistence, even a blending of cultures.

But others think it implies Japheth's descendants will eventually become dominant, maybe even displace Shem's line. And you know, throughout history, people have used these very verses to justify all sorts of things. Saying they're descended from Shem or Japheth to legitimize their power.

It's wild how these stories, meant to explain the world, end up being used to control it. Powerful stuff. And it reminds us to be careful, right? To read these texts critically, with the historical context in mind.

For sure. We can't just accept them at face value. Got to engage with them thoughtfully, responsibly.

Well, we've covered a lot in this deep dive. Ancient flood myths, the biblical flood, the covenant, the curse. And even those blessings, which set the stage for so much that comes later.

It really shows you how much these flood narratives still resonate, even today. Definitely. They're not just stories.

They're a way of understanding history and humanity. They make you think about destruction, renewal, the relationships between people. Big themes.

Absolutely. So as we wrap up, I'd leave you with this. The flood might be about chaos, but the aftermath is all about rebuilding.

Starting fresh, forging new connections, figuring out how to live together in this new world. And that's something we're still grappling with, right? How to build a better future, even after the storms. Couldn't have said it better myself.

Thanks for diving deep with us.