

Genesis: Robert Vannoy, Lecture 15, The Flood Narrative (Gen. 6–9)

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Robert Vannoy examines the biblical flood narrative in Genesis 6–9, beginning with the duration of the flood and its primary cause in human wickedness. It provides an in-depth analysis of four major interpretive views regarding the 'sons of God and daughters of men' in Genesis 6:1–4, including the mythological, angel, Sethite, and divine kingship interpretations. Additionally, the lecture defends the historicity of the biblical flood, citing references to Noah and the flood in the New Testament. Finally, it compares the biblical account with various Mesopotamian flood narratives, such as the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics, noting key similarities in their narrative structure alongside significant differences in specific details.

Outline

I. Introduction to Genesis 6–9: The Flood Narrative

A. Scope of the Lecture

1. Picks up from previous discussion of the extent of the flood (E.1 on the lecture sheet).
2. Focuses on the duration, cause, major interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4, and historicity of the flood.

II. The Duration of the Flood (E.2)

A. Biblical Timeline

1. Commencement: The 17th day of the second month of Noah's 600th year (Gen. 7:11).
2. Conclusion: The 27th day of the second month of the following year when the earth dried (Gen. 8:14).
3. Total Duration: Approximately one year and ten days.

B. Chronological Debates

1. Uncertainty regarding whether the writer used a solar or lunar year system (affecting the precise day count).
2. Significance: Unparalleled magnitude of the deluge, establishing that it was not a normal annual flood.

III. The Cause of the Flood (E.3)

A. Human Wickedness (Gen. 6:5–8)

1. Strong biblical assertion of wickedness as the direct cause of God's judgment.

2. Analysis of the superlatives piled up in Genesis 6:5:

- a. Intensity of the evil: Wickedness was 'great' in the earth.
- b. Inwardness of the evil: 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart'.
- c. Inclusiveness of the evil: '*every* imagination'.
- d. Exclusiveness of the evil: '*only* evil'.
- e. Continuousness of the evil: 'continually' (literally 'all the day' in Hebrew).

3. Universality and corruption of all flesh (Gen. 6:12).

B. Congenital Nature of Human Sin (Gen. 8:21)

1. Post-flood statement: 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.'
2. Sin is congenital/inherent to human nature rather than merely learned subsequent to the Fall.

IV. Interpretations of the 'Sons of God' and 'Daughters of Men' (Gen. 6:1–4) (E.4)

A. Contextual Purpose

1. Serves as a concrete example/illustration of the extreme wickedness described in verse 5.

B. Four Major Interpretive Views

1. View A: The Mythological Approach

- a. Concept: Critical scholars argue that legendary stories of divine beings marrying earthly women to produce giant demigods were incorporated from pagan mythology.
- b. Critique: Excluded by a conservative view of the Old Testament's inspiration and historicity.

2. View B: The Angels View

- a. Concept: 'Sons of God' refers to angels who took physical form and entered into sexual relationships with human women, producing the Nephilim.
- b. Contextual Support: Often appeals to Jude 6 (angels who 'kept not their first estate').
- c. Critique and Objections (citing William Henry Green):
 - i. The judgment in Gen. 6:3 is directed entirely at mankind, not at angels.
 - ii. Angels are not mentioned in the immediate or broader context of Genesis.
 - iii. Sexual union of angels is completely foreign to Hebrew thought. Jesus stated in heaven angels do not marry.
 - iv. The reference in Jude 6 is better understood as angels stepping outside their delegated sphere of authority/operation, rather than a spatial descent for sexual relationships.

3. View C: The Sethite View

- a. Concept: 'Sons of God' refers to the godly line of Seth, and 'daughters of men' refers to the ungodly line of Cain (advocated by Geerhardus Vos).

- b. The Sin: Intermarriage between godly and ungodly lines, leading to a loss of the godly line's spiritual identity.
- c. Detail: The initiative comes from the godly line, attracted by the physical beauty of Cainite women.
- d. Critique and Objections:
 - i. Lexical problem: It forces the Hebrew term 'ha'adam' (men/mankind) to have two different meanings in consecutive verses (generic mankind in v. 1, but specifically Cainites in v. 2).
 - ii. Explanatory problem: It does not naturally explain why the offspring of mixed marriages would specifically be the Nephilim (giants) or Giborim (mighty warriors).

4. View D: The Kingship View (Divine Kingship)

- a. Concept: 'Sons of God' is translated 'sons of the gods' (plural Elohim) and refers to pre-flood dynastic kings claiming divine status (common Near Eastern custom).
- b. Historical Evidence: Egyptian kings called 'sons of Re', Sumero-Akkadian kings as offspring of deities, Hittite kings as 'sons of the weather god', and Syrian rulers as 'sons of Baal'.
- c. The Sin: Polygamy. Dynastic rulers taking as many wives as they desired (reading the preposition 'min' as an explicative 'even all they chose' rather than partitive 'some of').
- d. Offspring: The Nephilim and Giborim ('mighty men of the name') were powerful, violent princes of these royal households.
- e. Etymology of Nephilim: Elusive term (listed in the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament by Harrison and Waltke); likely represents a 'warrior type' of person rather than just physical giants.

C. Narrative Synthesis and Dr. Vannoy's Assessment

1. Correlation with violence: The corruption and violence that filled the earth (Gen. 6:11–13) is directly linked to these royal households and their warrior classes.
2. Evaluation: Dr. Vannoy leans toward the Divine Kingship view due to linguistic and contextual consistency, though he notes the difficulty of being dogmatic.

V. The Time of the Flood

A. Method of Chronology

1. Requires working backward from fixed historical points (Kingdom period -> Exodus -> Patriarchs -> Gen. 11).

B. Impossibility of Precise Dating

1. Raw figures in Genesis 11 yield only 292 years between the flood and Abraham.
2. Historical and archaeological data reveal a much larger span of history that cannot fit this timeline.

3. Gaps are highly characteristic of biblical genealogies, preventing any precise dating of the flood.

VI. The Historicity of the Flood (E.5)

A. Biblical Representation

1. The Genesis text clearly intends the flood to be understood as a real, historical event.

B. New Testament Witness

1. Matthew 24:37–39: Jesus compares the sudden coming of the Son of Man to the historical reality of Noah's flood.
2. Hebrews 11:7: Recalls Noah's faith in preparing the ark to save his house.
3. 2 Peter 2:5 / 3:6: Affirms that God brought a deluge upon the ungodly ancient world, which perished.

C. Critical Objections and the Babylonian Parallel

1. Non-historical view: Critics claim the biblical story is an adaptation of Mesopotamian flood legends.
2. Finegan's assessment: Argues the biblical story is a monotheistic purification of the Babylonian story, which originally arose from a localized, embellished river flood.

VII. Comparison of Biblical and Babylonian Flood Stories

A. The Structural 'Skeleton' (Eight Parallel Points)

1. A great flood occurs, taking almost all human life.
2. A few individuals and animals are spared by means of a ship/boat.
3. Survivors are warned beforehand of the impending danger by divine revelation.
4. Divine instruction is given to construct an ark or vessel.
5. The vessel is constructed with several stories.
6. The vessel comes to rest on a mountain at the end of the flood.
7. Bird releases are utilized to ascertain outside environmental conditions.
8. Survivors offer sacrifices to the deity/deities after leaving the ship.

B. Multiple Mesopotamian Versions

1. Sumerian Version: Features the hero Ziusudra.
2. Gilgamesh Epic: Features the hero Utnapishtim.
3. Atrahasis Epic (Akkadian): Features the hero Atrahasis.

VIII. Differences in Specific Narrative Details

A. Ark/Ship Construction

1. Similarities: Great size, waterproofing instructions using bitumen/pitch.
2. Differences in Decks:

- a. Gilgamesh Epic: Utnapishtim's boat has 6 decks and is divided into 9 sections.
 - b. Biblical Account: Noah's ark has 3 stories (Gen. 6:16).
3. Differences in Dimensions:
- a. Noah's Ark: 300 x 50 x 30 cubits (approx. 450' x 75' x 45', displacing 43,000 tons, matching modern shipbuilding proportions).
 - b. Gilgamesh Epic: An exact cube of 120 cubits on a side.
 - c. Berossus Account: 3,000 feet long and 1,200 feet wide (astronomical, non-functional dimensions).

B. Synthesis and Future Discussion

1. Despite structural matches, the extensive differences in detail must be accounted for.
2. Next lecture will address how to explain this relationship and the theological significance of these parallels.