

# Robert Vannoy, Genesis, The Flood Narrative (Gen. 6-9) and Mesopotamian Parallels / Curse on Canaan, Lecture 16

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Flood, Genesis, Canaan, Curse, Noah, Gilgamesh, Mesopotamian, covenant, Ham

## Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Robert Vannoy examines the Mesopotamian flood parallels and the subsequent biblical narrative surrounding Noah's family and the curse on Canaan. First, it contrasts the biblical flood story with Babylonian versions like the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics, evaluating three major theories regarding their historical relationship and common traditions. Next, the lecture discusses the post-deluvian world order, focusing on the preservation of life, the reconfirmation of human dominion over animals, and the Noahic covenant. Finally, it analyzes the narrative of Noah's drunkenness, explaining the nature of Ham's offense and why the prophetic curse was specifically directed at Canaan rather than Ham.

## Outline

### I. Comparison of Biblical and Mesopotamian Flood Stories: Occupants and Details

#### A. Structure vs. Details

1. Both the biblical and Mesopotamian flood accounts share the same general structure (building a ship, saving family/animals, releasing birds, offering sacrifices) but have differences in detail.

#### B. Occupants of the Ark/Ship

1. Biblical Account (Noah): A highly restricted number of people—Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives (total of 8 people).
2. Gilgamesh Epic (Utnapishtim): Substantial number of occupants, including all family, kin, craftsmen, and named boats-men.
3. Atrahasis Epic (Atrahasis): The hero, his family, his relatives, and the craftsmen.
4. Sumerian Version (Ziusudra): Wife, children, relatives, and close friends.
5. Names: Ziusudra, Utnapishtim, Atrahasis, and Noah share no etymological connections.

#### C. The Bird Incident

1. Purpose: Releasing birds to determine if conditions are suitable to leave the ark.
2. Sumerian Version (Ziusudra): Releases a number of birds each time.
3. Gilgamesh Epic (Utnapishtim): Three single releases of a dove, a swallow, and a raven, in that order.
4. Biblical Account (Noah): Four single releases of a raven and three doves, in that order.
5. Logical Progression: As discussed by Alexander Heidel in *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, Noah's sequence is more logical because releasing the hearty raven first makes more sense than Utnapishtim releasing it last.

## **II. Explaining the Parallel Accounts: Three Views of the Relationship**

### **A. View A: The Mesopotamian Account Was Borrowed from a Proto-Semitic/Biblical Account**

1. Standard Dating: Mesopotamian texts exist from around 2000 B.C., whereas the biblical account is associated with Moses around 1400–1200 B.C.
2. Clay's Argument (*The Origin of Biblical Traditions*): Clay argues that an earlier written document does not prove the origin of the tradition itself.
3. The Shakespeare Analogy: If archaeologists in the future find a German translation of Shakespeare as the earliest copy, it doesn't prove Shakespeare has a German origin.
4. Amorite Legend: Clay proposes that the Gilgamesh epic was originally an Amorite legend brought from the west and 'Acadianized' around 2000 B.C.
5. Linguistic evidence: Amorite names and words are detectable in the Gilgamesh Epic, suggesting the Babylonian text represents a branch off of an older Proto-Semitic tradition.

### **B. View B: The Hebrews Borrowed Their Account from Mesopotamia**

1. This is a speculative and theoretical view since there is no surviving written tablet of the proposed Proto-Semitic account.
2. Alexander Heidel's Critique: Acknowledges a genetic relationship (identical skeleton) but notes that the 'flesh and blood'—above all the spirit, details, and theology—diverge dramatically.
3. Question: If the Hebrews simply borrowed it, why are the theological and specific details so fundamentally different?

### **C. View C: Both Accounts Share a Common Source / Independent Arrangements**

1. Gerhard von Rad's Analysis: The 'Babel/Bible' controversy of direct dependence is largely closed; direct dependence of Genesis on Babylon is no longer assumed due to extensive differences.
2. Von Rad's Hypothesis: Both are independent arrangements of an older tradition (perhaps Sumerian).

3. Canaanite Theory: Von Rad claims Israel met a flood tradition in Canaan and assimilated it. Vannoy critiques this as pure hypothesis with 'not a scrap of evidence' since no Canaanite flood stories exist.
4. Distribution of Flood Legends: Flood stories exist globally (among Indians, Persians, Africans, Australians, Eskimos, and native Americans) with remarkable uniformity.
5. Cosmic Experience: Von Rad suggests this widespread distribution requires the assumption of an actual, primitive cosmic experience/recollection rather than just localized catastrophes.
6. Anthropological Critique of Widespread Legends: Anthropologists point out that stories like the 'magic flight/obstacle flight' are also globally distributed and highly uniform without proving historical reality, as tales can easily diffuse across cultural and linguistic lines. Thus, universal prevalence is not a definitive proof of historicity.

### III. Conditions Governing the Post-Deluvian World (Gen. 9:1–17)

#### A. Directions for the Propagation and Maintenance of Life (Gen. 9:1–7)

1. Blessing of Fruitfulness: God tells Noah and his sons to 'be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth,' repeating His original command to Adam and Eve.
2. Reconfirmation of Human Dominion: Dominion over animals is reconfirmed, though now animals are restrained by the fear/dread of man.
3. Animals Granted as Food: Humans are explicitly permitted to eat animals ('every moving thing that lives shall be food for you').
  - a. Previous practices: Animal lives were taken for coats (Gen. 3:21) and sacrifices (Gen. 4:4), but Scripture is silent on whether pre-flood humans ate meat.
  - b. Calvin's view: 'I affirm nothing on the subject' since it is of little consequence.
4. Prohibition on Eating Blood: 'flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood, shall you not eat'.
  - a. Purpose: Likely to encourage reverence for life (life is in the blood) and anticipating ordinances of blood sacrifice.
  - b. Continuity: Since these ritual laws were fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament (e.g., Peter's vision where nothing is called unclean), this dietary prohibition does not continue past the era of ritual sacrifice.
5. Sacredness of Human Life and Capital Punishment (Gen. 9:5–6):
  - a. Divine Ordinance: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed'.
  - b. Grounding: Human life is sacred because man is made in the image of God.
  - c. Human Government: God delegates the power of the sword to human representatives to enact justice.
  - d. Romans 13 support: Paul supports the government's right to hold the power of the sword and execute wrath on evildoers.

## **B. The Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9:8–17)**

1. God establishes a covenant with Noah, his descendants, and all living creatures.
2. Promise: Never again will all life be destroyed by a flood.
3. The Sign of the Covenant: The rainbow set in the clouds.
4. God's Remembrance: The bow is an anthropomorphic reminder that God will preserve the earth as the arena for His redemptive plan.

## **IV. The Curse on Canaan (Gen. 9:18–29)**

### **A. Historical Misuse of the Passage**

1. Pro-slavery arguments in America confidently assumed Black people were descendants of Noah's second son, Ham, and therefore subject to a divine curse.
2. Buswell III's Critique (Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture): Disproves this argument as 'utterly fantastic,' noting that historically Ham's descendants in Egypt and Ethiopia were non-Negro and that the curse was not even pronounced on Ham.

### **B. The Biblical Reality of the Curse**

1. The curse is pronounced specifically on Canaan, Ham's fourth son—not on Ham himself.
2. Nature of the Pronouncement: It is not a mere expression of human anger but a prophetic prediction of the future lines of these descendants.
3. Why Canaan instead of Ham?
  - a. Hard to answer definitively, but Noah likely perceived (via the Holy Spirit) that the spiritual characteristics of Ham would be perpetuated and amplified in his son Canaan.
  - b. Relevance: Israel would later come into intense conflict with Canaan's descendants.
  - c. Canaanite practices: Leviticus 18 records the abominable sexual and moral customs that later defiled the land of Canaan.

### **C. What Was Ham's Offense?**

1. The text states Ham saw his father's nakedness and told his brothers, who then walked in backward to cover Noah.
2. Keil and Delitzsch assessment: Ham displayed a shameless sensuality, taking pleasure in exposing and disrespecting his father, contrasted with the reverential modesty of Shem and Japheth.
3. Euphemism Theories: Some scholars suggest 'saw the nakedness' is a euphemism for a deviant sexual act, but the immediate context (specifically Shem and Japheth covering the father in verse 23) suggests literal physical exposure is the primary issue.