

**PART FOUR**  
**THE FLOOD**  
**GENESIS 6:9 - 9:29**

The earth is filled with violence

**<sup>9</sup>These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.**

**<sup>10</sup>And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.**

**<sup>11</sup>Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.**

**<sup>12</sup>And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.**

**<sup>13</sup>And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.**

Once again we find *tōledōt* (see 2:4, 5:1). Noah was introduced as one who 'found favour in the eyes of YHWH' (6:8). Here he is described as a 'righteous man' who walks with God (compare Enoch, 5:24). It is those like Noah who keep the world open to God's saving action, because it is the righteous who obey God's word. The authors fit the narrative of the flood into a genealogy that focuses on the continuance of God's blessing (see 4:1ff).

As we have already heard (6:5-6), mankind is corrupt. Human beings have a heart of stone (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). We recall the judgment of Jeremiah as he reflected on the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile:

Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonour cover us; for we have sinned against YHWH our God, we and our ancestors, from our youth even to this day; and we have not obeyed the voice of YHWH our God.

– Jeremiah 3:25

The people of Israel and the people of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 32:30

Here the accent is on violence, echoing the following from Jeremiah:

As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness. Violence and destruction resound in her; her sickness and wounds are ever before me. Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so no one can live in it.

– Jeremiah 6:7-8

Of particular interest is the following from Ezekiel:

You [king of Tyre] were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour. So I threw you to the earth.

– Ezekiel 28:15-17

God cannot abide the corruption and violence which is bringing to the verge of chaos the creation which God saw as 'very good' (1:31).

Authors draw attention to the close parallels with the instructions given to Utnapishtim in Tablet XI of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh.

The word translated ‘ark’ (tēbâ) is used also for the ‘basket’ used to save Moses from the waters of the Nile (Exodus 2:3,5). This is surely intentional. It is made of wood (gōper) that is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament – presumably because the authors are borrowing from a story that comes from another land where the wood was indigenous.

The dimensions of the ark are considerably larger than Solomon’s temple, which is described as being ‘sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high’ (1 Kings 6:2). Though much smaller than the ‘ship’ of Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh! As it stands, the instructions concerning the roof in verse sixteen are obscure. Perhaps it is to project out a cubit from the walls? The door in the side shows that the ark is not imagined as a ship. The priests want their readers to think of it as a sanctuary, a place of refuge. It is a microcosm of the universe with three levels (the underworld, earth and heaven)

The flood (mabbûl) is the ocean above the firmament:

YHWH sits enthroned over the flood;  
YHWH sits enthroned as king forever.

– Psalm 29:10

Verse eighteen expresses the key to the whole narrative. God promises salvation. We know that Noah will obey because he has already been introduced as a ‘righteous man’, that is, a man who listens to God and does God’s will.

It was human violence that brought about the destruction of Judah and the exile. What was needed was someone ‘righteous’, someone to heed God’s word, for God’s promise does not go away. It will be effective so long as there is someone to listen and carry out God’s will.

**<sup>14</sup>Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.**

**<sup>15</sup>This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits.**

**<sup>16</sup>Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.**

**<sup>17</sup>For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.**

**<sup>18</sup>But I will establish my covenant with you.**

**<sup>18</sup>and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.**

**<sup>19</sup>And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.**

**<sup>20</sup>Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.**

**<sup>21</sup>Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them."**

**<sup>22</sup>Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.**

**<sup>7:1</sup>Then YHWH said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation.**

**<sup>2</sup>Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.**

**<sup>3</sup>For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground."**

**<sup>4</sup>And Noah did all that YHWH had commanded him.**

In naming those who are saved, the authors speak in traditional terms of what is essential to a family: parents and their married sons with their wives.

Since the command of 1:29-30 is imagined as holding in primeval 'times', living things are not to be eaten by human beings. A pair of each is therefore sufficient to ensure the saving of the species. Animals perish with people, and animals are saved when people act righteously. We stand and fall together. We humans are responsible 'to keep them alive'.

Noah is to take food for his family and for the animals.

In a number of the myths from the ancient Near East, the hero is saved by outwitting the gods. Here he is saved through obedience.

The post-exilic authors of Genesis have a vested interest in cult. Verse one picks up verse eighteen above. The extra number of 'clean' animals and birds is needed for sacrifice (see 8:20). The numbers seven and forty are traditional symbols, seven for fullness (from the phases of the moon) and forty for a generation. Think of the forty years that the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness (Numbers 14:34-35), and the forty days and forty nights that Elijah had to journey through the wilderness to encounter God (1Kings 19:8). Think, too, of Jesus in the wilderness, tested by Satan (Mark 1:13).

The number six hundred occurs in the Babylonian king list as well. The significance of the number will emerge in 8:13. Verses eight and nine refer back to the command given by God in 6:18-19.

These verses highlight the solemn entry into the ark, putting stress in this way on God's saving act, rather than on the destructive flood itself.

The second month and seventeenth day allude to the classical symbolic numbers 40 (30+10) and 7. The flood is portrayed as the result of the collapse of the firmament, which God created on day two to make space for the world and for life. This is no ordinary flood. God's creative action is being reversed. All outside the ark (the sanctuary) is reverting to primeval chaos.

Verse twelve fulfils the words of YHWH recorded in 7:4. The contrast between verse twelve and verse eleven could not be more stark. It is an indication that we are dealing with a text blended from different sources.

Note that 'they went in' recurs four times in verses thirteen to sixteen. All is happening 'as God had commanded Noah' (7:16). This is at the heart of the theological perspective of the authors. Salvation is possible, and the promise is realised, when we listen to and follow the word of God.

Verse sixteen concludes with a simple statement of YHWH's care.

**<sup>6</sup>Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth.**

**<sup>7</sup>And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.**

**<sup>8</sup>Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground,**

**<sup>9</sup>two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.**

**<sup>10</sup>And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.**

**<sup>11</sup>In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.**

**<sup>12</sup>The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.**

**<sup>13</sup>On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark,**

**<sup>14</sup>they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature.**

**<sup>15</sup>They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life.**

**<sup>16</sup>And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and YHWH shut him in.**

**17The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.**

**18The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters.**

**19The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered;**

**20the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.**

**21And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings;**

**22everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died.**

**23He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.**

**24And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.**

The 'forty days' picks up God's words recorded in 7:4. The Greek text adds 'and forty nights'. The picture is stark and majestic.

The focus in verses eighteen to twenty-one is on the power of God and the awesome nature of the flood.

The highest mountain in the area out of which the narrative comes is Mount Ararat: seventeen thousand feet. It is of no significance to the text as we have it that the mountains of the Caucasus are two thousand feet higher, and Mount Everest rises to thirty thousand feet. Though the image of a flood comes from real experience, the authors are not writing about a particular historical flood. Rather they are using 'flood' to dramatise the destruction of the earth and its inhabitants that results from the increased violence of those who refuse to heed and obey God's word.

Verses twenty-one to twenty-three speak of the destruction of every living thing that is not in the sanctuary of the ark. YHWH's words in 6:7 are fulfilled. YHWH takes back the breath that he gave in 2:7.

Verse one is the turning point of the narrative. Our attention has been caught up with the awesome reality of the flood which seems to be reducing creation to its primeval chaos. Now, suddenly, our focus is where the authors have wanted it to be from the beginning: on God, and what God is doing to purify and save creation. As in 1:2, it is God's 'wind' ('breath', 'spirit') that opposes the forces of chaos.

The Genesis Narrative presumes that crime demands punishment, and that violence, left to itself, would destroy creation. Its focus, however, is on salvation. This is in keeping with the central theme of the Pentateuch, expressed by Clines in the following words:

No matter how drastic man's sin becomes, destroying what God has made good and bringing the world to the brink of uncreation, God's grace never fails to deliver man from the consequences of his sin. Even when man responds to a fresh start with the old pattern of sin, God's commitment to his world stands firm, and sinful man experiences the favour of God as well as his righteous judgment.

– *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, page 76

Verse two combines the talk of the collapsing firmament (1:6-8; 7:11) with the simpler version that talks of rain (7:4).

Verses three and four refer back to 7:24 and 8:3 where the flood is tabulated as lasting for 150 days (5 months).

Talk of Mount Ararat is an indication of the original Eastern provenance of the myth upon which the authors are drawing. What we have is a symbolic statement: the cosmic centre of the earth with the temple on its peak touching heaven. The temple is the sacred space, the source for the re-generating of the earth. As in 1:9-10, receding waters reveal the earth.

**<sup>1</sup>But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided;**

**<sup>2</sup>the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained,**

**<sup>3</sup>and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated;**

**<sup>4</sup>and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.**

**<sup>5</sup>The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.**



**6**At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made

**7**and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.

**8**Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground;

**9**but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him.

**10**He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark;

**11**and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

**12**Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

**13**In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

**14**In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

In the Babylonian epic, after his ship lands on Mount Nisir, Gilgamesh waits for seven days before sending out a dove. Gilgamesh, too, has three attempts, sending out a dove first, then a swallow, and finally a raven. Our text starts with the raven. The practice of using birds to gather information was typical of ancient seafaring.

Verses eight to nine describe Noah's second attempt to ascertain the proper time to come out of the ark. The importance of trust between human beings and other living creatures is highlighted in the way Noah welcomes the dove back into the ark.

This same trust is highlighted in the way the dove knows what Noah needs and brings it to him.

It is New Year's Day, the day of the cultic celebration of creation and its renewal. It is also the first day of the first year of the seventh century of Noah's life. The symbolism of these numbers is obvious. Comparing the numbers here with 7:11, it becomes clear that the episode of the flood is presented as having lasted exactly one solar year (twelve lunar months plus ten days). This, plus the numbering of months (months were named in ancient Hebrew but not numbered), indicates that the priest authors are following the Babylonian solar calendar, rather than the ancient Israelite lunar one.



The blessing given by God in 1:28 continues after the flood. God's solemn words commanding Noah to enter the ark (6:18-20) are echoed in the command to 'Go out'.

**15**Then God said to Noah,

**16**"Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you.

**17**Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."

**18**So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.

**19**And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

The Priestly School keeps sacrifice to YHWH for Mount Sinai. The material included here is clearly from another source. Celebrating salvation through sacrifice to the gods is a common element in the ancient flood stories. Noah's first deed is to built an altar to YHWH. In terms that echo words found in the Gilgamesh epic, in which 'the gods smelled the sweet savour', YHWH accepts Noah's sacrifice.

The importance of verse 21 cannot be overstated. Human beings have not changed: the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth. If change is to come it must come from the heart of God – and it does. YHWH asserts that he will live with human beings in spite of their tendency to sin. God decides to make his sun rise on the evil as well as the good, and send rain on the just and the unjust alike (see Matthew 5:45). Israel was not abandoned in exile – a sign that God will not abandon creation to its own perversity. Nature is stabilised in a constant cyclic rhythm within which God's blessing is realised.

**20**Then Noah built an altar to YHWH, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

**21**And when YHWH smelled the pleasing odour, YHWH said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of human-kind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

**22**As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

## God's blessing

It is interesting to read the following texts, which come from the period of the exile:

This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says YHWH, who has compassion on you.

– Isaiah 54:9-10

But now thus says YHWH, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

– Isaiah 43:1-2

**<sup>1</sup>God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.**

**<sup>2</sup>The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.**

**<sup>3</sup>Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.**

**<sup>4</sup>Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.**

**<sup>5</sup>For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.**

**<sup>6</sup>Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.**

**<sup>7</sup>And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.”**

We have here the conclusion of the flood narrative from the Priestly School, beginning with the blessing (9:1-7; see 8:21-22), and then speaking of the covenant (9:8-17, see 8:22).

Human history is as it is experienced in the post-flood world. There never was another. The pre-flood narrative gives expression to how the world was intended to be by God, and paints an ideal picture of what it would be like if only we listened to God. In the post-flood world human relations with other humans and with the animal world are not as God intended, but it is in this world, with its imperfections, that God relates to us..

In contrast to 1:28-29, humans may eat meat, but, to restrain the violence that brought mankind to the verge of self-destruction, there is the demand that God-given, life-giving blood must not be taken as food. A ‘human being’ (‘ādām) must not eat ‘blood’ (dām).

We have already heard that human beings are created in God's image (1:26). Here we are being told that this applies to others who are not like us (9:6).

The translation of the Hebrew *berît* as ‘covenant’ must be used with caution. What we are dealing with here is a one-sided commitment or assurance given by God to all living things. It is an assurance that God promises to uphold (*hēqîm*, 9:9, 11, 17).

No longer is there a direct connection between crime and punishment. Evil will have its consequences, but the authors want us to see that these are not grounded in God’s anger, as the ancient Near Eastern myths understand it

God ‘remembered Noah’(8:1) after the flood had destroyed everything outside the sanctuary of the ark. Now God promises to remember and honour his assurance (9:15). God’s disappointment with the human race does not lead (as it does in a number of ancient myths) to God’s withdrawal, but to God’s compassion. The rainbow after rain is a reminder of God’s assurance that the earth as we know it will never be destroyed by flood. The repetitions serve to reinforce the assurance.

The covenant with Noah is a covenant with the whole human race. Every member of the human race, and every community, has its own special dignity and responsibility. God is the God of the whole human race.

**8**Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,

**9**“As for me, I am *upholding* my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

**10**and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

**11**I *uphold* my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

**12**God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

**13**I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

**14**When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,

**15**I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

**16**When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

**17**God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I *uphold* between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The Jewish scholar U. Cassuto captures the essential symbolic significance of the narrative of the flood in his commentary on Genesis (Jerusalem, Magnes 1964, pages 30-31).

It depicts for us, step by step, the acts of divine justice that bring destruction upon the earth, which has become filled with violence; and the scenes which pass before us grow increasingly gloomier until in the darkness of death ... there remains only one, tiny, faint point of light, to wit, the ark, which floats on the fearful waters that have covered everything, and which guards between its walls the hope of future life. [We then see] consecutively the various stages of the divine compassion that renews life upon earth. The light that waned until it became a minute point in the midst of the dark world begins to grow bigger and brighter till it illumines again the entire scene before us, and shows us a calm and peaceful world, crowned with the rainbow that irradiates the cloud with its colours – a sign and pledge of life and peace for the coming generations.

**<sup>18</sup>The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan.**

**<sup>19</sup>These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled.**

**<sup>20</sup>Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.**

**<sup>21</sup>He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent.**

**<sup>22</sup>And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.**

**<sup>23</sup>Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.**

Verses eighteen and nineteen conclude the narrative of the flood, and introduce the family tree of Noah's three sons from whom the whole of the human race descends (see 5:32, 6:10 and 7:13).

Verses twenty to twenty-seven is a narrative inserted into the genealogy (compare the story of Cain and Abel, 4:2-16). It begins the transition from the flood to Abraham.. The story of Cain and Abel is about a division between brothers. This is about a division between father and son.

Once again advances in civilisation, in this case viticulture, are traced back, not to the gods (as in non-Israelite myths), but to a human being (compare 3:17).

Intoxication is not the problem here. Rather, it is that Noah is naked. The loss of dignity brought disgrace (see Exodus 20:26; 2Samuel 6:26). A dutiful son would have covered his father's nakedness, not left him there and gone and reported his shame to his brothers. The other sons behave as is fitting for dutiful sons.

Handing on tradition requires respect of the older generation by the younger. Ham has acted in a way that disrupts this order. He is to suffer the disgrace of being a slave to his own brothers. There is no surprise that, living in the land of Canaan, the descendants of Shem, the people of Israel, would focus the curse on Canaan, the descendants of Ham. They add a blessing on themselves.

Verse twenty-seven uses a pun on words in relating Japheth to 'may he make space for' (yapt, from pātâ).

Verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine form the conclusion to the narrative of the flood as well as the conclusion to the genealogy of 5:1-32, 6:9-10 and 7:6.

**<sup>24</sup>When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him,**

**<sup>25</sup>he said, "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."**

**<sup>26</sup>He also said, "Blessed by YHWH my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."**

**<sup>27</sup>May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."**

**<sup>28</sup>After the flood Noah lived three hundred fifty years.**

**<sup>29</sup>All the days of Noah were nine hundred fifty years; and he died.**