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A POSTEXILIC READING OF THE BIBLICAL FLOOD NARRATIVE

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Among the most widely debated passages in the Old Testament is the flood narrative. Scholars have long puzzled over the vagueness, inconsistencies, and outright contradictions in the account of Genesis chapters 6–9, attempting to answer where it came from, what traditions lay behind it, what it means, and how it originally read.[1] It may never be possible to know with certainty the answers to many of these questions, but as new discoveries, ideas, and methods come forward we will continue to attempt to answer them in the best possible way.

There has been much study on the early development of the biblical flood narrative—its sources and original meaning; but this article will attempt a reading as it would have been understood by the Jews at the time it reached the form in which we now see it.[2] The time period emphasized will be from the

1. Though the source-critical conclusions about the Flood Narrative will be briefly reviewed in this article, this passage of text has been studied through many different methodological lenses which will not be covered here. These include text critical studies of the terminologies used, studies that defend the unity of the passage on literary and narrative grounds, and comparisons with other Mesopotamian versions of the flood story.

2. The extent of scholarly work that has been produced regarding this passage is too vast to be completely summarized here. For the purpose of this article, specific mention will only be made of that literature which directly pertains to the thesis of this essay. As far as I can tell, there have not been any previous studies addressing the significance of the flood narrative when read as a post-exilic document. For exegetical analyses of the flood narrative, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary of the Book of Genesis, Part One: From Adam to Noah* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary of the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984); David J. A. Clines, "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Genesis 6: 1–4) in the Context of the 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1–11)," *JSOT* 13 (1979): 33–46; Lyle Eslinger, "A Contextual Identification of the bene ha'elohim and benoth ha'adam in Genesis 6: 1–4," *JSOT* 4 (1979): 65–73; Robert W. E. Forrest, "Paradise Lost Again: Violence and Obedience in the Flood Narrative," *JSOT* 19 (1994): 3–17; Jon C. Gertz, "Source Criticism in the Primeval History of Genesis: An Outdated Paradigm

Babylonian conquest until shortly after the return from exile. We will examine the religious and political changes that took place over this time period which produced the environment in which the final redaction of Genesis 6:1–9:17 was created. Specific emphasis will be placed on the themes of personal obedience, destruction of the wicked, proper ritual worship, and covenant. After reviewing the developing importance of these themes from the last days of the kingdom of Judah to the return from exile, we will examine how the flood narrative would have been read by contemporaries in light of their recent past.

The exact date at which the final redaction of the flood narrative took place is unknown, though many scholars have attempted to date the various

for the Study of the Pentateuch?" *FAT* 78 (2011): 169–80; John Maier, "The Flood Story: Four Literary Approaches," in *Approaches to Teaching the Hebrew Bible as Literature in Translation*, eds. Barry N. Olshen and Yael S. Feldman (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989), 106–109; Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation,* Vol. 1 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985); David L. Petersen, "The Yahwist on the Flood," *VT* (1976): 438–46; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910); Paul Romanoff, "A Third Version of the Flood Narrative," *JBL* (1931): 304–07; Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1978): 336–48. For discussion on the dating of the composition of the Pentateuch, see W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra: A Historical Survey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch,* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); David M. Carr, "The Rise of Torah," in *Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance*, eds. Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007); Francois Castel, *The History of Israel and Judah in Old Testament Times*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel": A Study in Biblical Origins* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); C. Houtman, "Ezra and the Law: Observations of the Supposed Relation Between Ezra and the Pentateuch," in *Remembering All the Way: A Collection of Old Testament Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1981); H. Jagersma, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Benjamin D. Sommer, "Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); James W. Watts, "Using Ezra's Time as a Methodological Pivot for Understanding the Rhetoric and Functions of the Pentateuch," in *The Pentateuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

Another venue of research involving the Pentateuch and the exile is the extent to which Jewish literature was influenced by Canaanite and Mesopotamian mythology. This topic will not be broached in the current study, but significant scholarship has been conducted on the subject. For references, see Clines, "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode," 33–46; Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford, 2000); Lyle Eslinger, "A Contextual Identification of the bene ha'elohim and benoth ha'adam in Genesis 6:1–4," *JSOT* 4 (1979): 65–73; Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels,* (Chicago: Chicago, 1946); A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, Volume II* (New York: Oxford, 2003); Shemuel Shaviv, "The Polytheistic Origins of the Biblical Flood Narrative," *VT* 54 (2004): 527–48.

sources seen within it. Our best approach is to assume that the narrative was finalized at the time that the Pentateuch as a whole became part of Jewish scripture.[3] When seeking a date for the flood narrative or other passages in the Pentateuch, the typical scholarly method used has been source criticism. Though its validity is debated by some scholars,[4] source criticism has made major contributions to our understanding of the development of Pentateuchal texts. Probably the most influential product of source criticism is Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis, which has been used, studied, and debated by generations of Bible scholars since.[5] While taking these conclusions into account, this article will not use source criticism as its primary methodology since our focus here is on the final form of the biblical flood narrative, not the sources from which it came.[6]

Until the last few decades, the prevailing view has been that early versions of the Pentateuch were in the process of development before the exile and that it was compiled in Babylon in its final form from these earlier sources.[7] Recently, however, the consensus has shifted in favor of a post-exilic Persian

3. The terms "Pentateuch," "Torah," and "Law" will be assumed to be generally interchangeable in this article.

4. See Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, 81–88; Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," 336–48; Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch,* 77. Many scholars now believe that the Pentateuchal narrative as we now see it is a post-exilic invention. Proponents of this theory argue that each of the older sources contained collections of individual stories that were later combined into a continuous history of the Israelite nation, from Creation to the conquest of the promised land. See Carr, "The Rise of Torah" 48–56.

5. The Documentary Hypothesis says that the Pentateuch was created primarily by combining four different sources together. These sources are given the designations of Elohistic (E), Yahwistic (J), Priestly (P), and Deuteronomistic (D). J and E are both considered to be folkloric accounts of origin stories, explaining the early history of the ancestors of Israel and the nature of their god. E may have been composed as far back as the time of David. J was probably a bit later, no earlier than 750 B.C.E. D began with the reforms of Josiah and was mostly written during the exile in order to explain what had caused the fall of Judah. P is most likely a composition from the very end of Judah into the Exile, though various scholars sometimes place it before the exile. It is concerned with ritual procedure more than deep religious questions. See Skinner, *A Commentary on Genesis,* xl–lviii, lx-lxvi; Castel, *The History of Israel and Judah,* 144–46; Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch,* 138–65. For an excellent history of the development and later use of Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis see Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*, 1–28.

6. The final redaction of the Pentateuch is most likely later than any of the sources expounded in the Documentary Hypothesis. This would mean that the theme and overall purpose of the narratives within it would not be those intended by any of the sources from which it was created; rather the text of the various sources was used by a later redactor to convey his own themes. Therefore, for the dating of this final redaction, other methodologies than source criticism must be employed. See Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch,* 25; Skinner, *Commentary on Genesis*, xl–lii.

7. Albright, *The Biblical Period,* 52–96; Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 97–100.

period of composition.[8] This means that though many of the individual stories from the Pentateuch existed in various forms before the exile, they did not start to be connected into a continuous history of the origin of Israel until the exile and later. The narrative of the Pentateuch as it stands can be seen to reflect the concerns of a small vassal state of the Persian Empire, which, having recently sustained serious blows to its culture, was desperate to maintain its national identity and thereby avoid being absorbed into the surrounding nations. It is the purpose of this article to show how the story of the Jews returning from Exile can be not only read back into the narrative of the Pentateuch as a whole, but elements of it can also be seen in each individual narrative, as exemplified by the story of the flood.

We will here focus on several specific themes, noting how those themes developed throughout the history of Israel and also observing their presence in the flood narrative. Source criticism tells us that several recensions of the story existed from various time periods in Israelite history, but the elements of each recension that were included in the final version emphasize certain themes. These themes may be an indication of the primary concerns of postexilic Judaism.

Jewish literature came to focus on a pattern of disobedience of Yahweh's chosen people, punishment, and later deliverance by Yahweh. The story of the flood also features a great destruction as a consequence of disobedience and the preservation of a small righteous remnant to continue in a covenant relationship with Yahweh.[9] Narratives of the primeval history such as this one established the pattern of Yahweh's interaction with humankind that would later develop into a law given to a chosen people.[10] Obedience to his commands, especially concerning proper ritual worship, the consequences of disobedience, and the establishment of covenant—themes that form the main features of the flood narrative[11]—are the basic principles behind the Torah. In the religious life of second-temple Judaism, these themes took the form of holiness, centralization of Jewish life on the temple of Jerusalem, and status as Yahweh's chosen people.[12] In order to establish the context for our reading

8. Carr, "The Rise of Torah," 39–47; Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*, 51–52; Watts, "Using Ezra's Time for Understanding the Pentateuch," 489–94.

9. Many scholars have noted that the theme of impending destruction as a consequence for disobedience seems to be intentionally foreshadowed in the narratives of the Pentateuch, especially the Primeval History. See Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch,* 35.

10. Forrest, "Paradise Lost Again," 3–4.

11. Forrest, "Paradise Lost Again," 3–4.

12. Wardle, *History and Religion of Israel,* 171–73.

of the flood narrative, we must understand how these themes came to be so central in Jewish national literature.[13]

The first event recorded in Jewish literature that we can see as reflecting the developing concept of what would become proper ritual worship is the story of Hezekiah's reforms, found in 2 Kings 18 and 2 Chronicles 29–32.[14] These reforms focus on the centralization of the cult in the Jerusalem temple. This concept became increasingly important to the religion of Judah and was used later as a criterion by which the kings and the people were evaluated and judged. Even though the histories of Kings and Chronicles were written much later, this criterion for evaluation must have been used even as early on as the time of Hezekiah because elements of it can be seen even in the writings of First Isaiah. However, it became especially important during the exile as various challenges to the religion arose. Not least among these challenges was the question of why Yahweh had allowed his chosen people to fall. Evaluating the righteousness of the nation based on how well they observed the proper form of ritual worship allowed for the view that it was not Yahweh who had abandoned his people, but that rather they, his people, had betrayed him by turning to other gods and unauthorized practices.

These ritual standards became a means of evaluating the righteousness both of the kings and of the nation as a whole. The Deuteronomistic history (Samuel–Kings) attributed the downfall of Judah to the failure of the Davidic monarchy to lead the people according to God's will.[15] Hezekiah and Josiah had been good, righteous kings, but the bad had outweighed the good in the end.

Prophetic literature from the period of the exile and after clearly illustrates the increasing emphasis on punishing the people for disobedience to the established cult, this time extending the blame not just to the nation collectively,

13. This is the history of Israel and Judah as found in the biblical record. We would do well to remember, as many have justly pointed out, that the biblical account may be little more than a post-exilic recreation of history. See, for example, Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel,* 81–86.

14. Whether or not the accounts of Kings and Chronicles, which were written long after the events took place, represent an accurate historical picture is inconsequential. They are certainly based upon true events and, more importantly, reflect the exilic and post-exilic idea of proper devotion to Yahweh.

15. Note the pattern begun in 1 Kings 15:1–3: "Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam son of Nebat, Abijam began to reign over Judah. He reigned for three years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Maacah daughter of Abishalom. He committed all the sins that his father did before him; his heart was not true to the Lord his God, like the heart of his father David." This pattern of analysis of kings based on the righteousness of David continues throughout the book of Kings.

but also to individuals.[16] Jeremiah's prophecies from the early stages of the Babylonian conquest remind the people of Judah of everything that God has done for them as his chosen people (Jer 2:5–8), while condemning them for disregarding him. The point is that misfortunes that come upon Judah will be their own doing, as explained in 2:19: "Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts." At the same time, Ezekiel in Babylon accused the people of Jerusalem of violent crimes and of abandoning their god,[17] and prophesied of the city's final destruction: "Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. . . . I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. . . . You shall know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you." (Ezek 22:19–22)

Clearly, the exiles from Judah recognized their fate as the divine justice of Yahweh for their own disobedience.[18] The Deuteronomist emphasized the collective depravity of the nation as a result of the leadership of its kings, and the prophets emphasized the wickedness of each individual.[19] The scope of condemnation ranged from a national to an individual scale, excluding no one.

In Babylon, strict definition of the Jewish religion deepened as challenges to it intensified. The immediate threat was the possibility of being absorbed into the surrounding peoples as so many other nations had been. In order to preserve national identity, personal devotion to the Israelite religion came to be emphasized—a trend that had been started earlier by the prophets. Before now, the invulnerability of the kingdom of Judah had been assumed solely on merit of being the chosen people of Yahweh. Now it became clear that that protection was contingent upon obedience. The ritual purity laws in the Law of Moses became supremely important, and regulations that distinguished the people of Judah from the other nations, such as dietary restrictions and Sabbath-day observance, came to the forefront.[20]

16. Albright and Castel both give good analyses of this trend in prophetic writings. Albright, *The Biblical Period,* 82–92; Castel, *History of Israel and Judah,* 136–62.

17. For example, Ezekiel 22:3–4 (NIV): "Thus says the Lord God: A city! Shedding blood within itself; its time has come; making its idols, defiling itself. You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and defiled by the idols that you have made; you have brought your day near, the appointed time of your years has come."

18. Wardle, *History and Religion of Israel,* 193–94; J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1986), 421.

19. Ezekiel 14:14 emphasizes that even Noah, Daniel, and Job—individually righteous ancestors of the Judahites—could not by their virtues save the rest of Judah from the consequences of their own disobedience.

20. Jagersma, *A History of Israel,* 185–92.

When Cyrus of Persia conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, things were greatly changed from the way they had been before, both politically and culturally. The danger of losing cultural identity had not disappeared with the return from exile. Judah was no longer a strong, independent kingdom, but a small vassal state to the Persian Empire which, while in the process of rebuilding itself, was surrounded by strong foreign influences. The new focus of their hope drew from deep Jewish nationalism, now centered not on the supremacy of the Davidic dynasty as it had been centuries before but on religious and cultural unification. The main seat of authority to the people of Judah became the high priest,[21] and the temple the central focus in the lives of all Jews. Strict emphasis was placed on separation from other nations.[22]

Considering the growing emphasis both on personal obedience and purity and on the centralization of the cult, it is no surprise to learn that one of the first priorities upon returning from exile was the rebuilding of the temple.[23] Essential to the cultic procedures of the purity laws was a house of God at which to sacrifice. In addition, the threat of loss to the religion, in the face of pressures from surrounding influences, necessitated a strong focal point for Jewish religious devotion.

Of more immediate significance to the current discussion of Jewish literature is the compilation of the Pentateuch. In it we can see a reflection of these themes that had developed into the post-exilic period: proper ritual worship, obedience to Yahweh, punishment for disobedience. The event that is generally seen as marking the acceptance of the Pentateuch into the Jewish literary corpus is Ezra's reading of the law ceremony in Nehemiah 8–10.[24]

Ezra's role in the canonization of the Pentateuch is far from agreed upon, however. Some scholars believe that the Pentateuch was already in its final form, and that Ezra was merely an instrument in making it part of the scriptural corpus,[25] while others think that the law that Ezra preached was not the Pentateuch we know at all.[26] This article will accept the middle ground of the argument: that though earlier versions of Pentateuchal material existed before and during the exile, Ezra had a significant role in the compilation and canonization of its final form.[27] Most important to the current discussion is

21. Castel, *History of Israel and Judah,* 154; Jagersma, *History of Israel,* 190–91.
22. See Ezra 4:1–3; 9:1–4; 10; Nehemiah 13:23–30.
23. Ezra 1:5.
24. Castel, *History of Israel and Judah,* 160–62.
25. Albright, *Biblical Period*, 94–96.
26. Houtman, "Ezra and the Law," 103–13.
27. Jagersma, *History of Israel,* 201–03.

that the covenant renewal ceremony recorded in Nehemiah 8–10 emphasizes individual commitment to a covenant of abiding by the laws given to Moses, just as does the Pentateuch as we have it.

The acceptance of the Pentateuch into Jewish scriptural canon marks a landmark leading to what Judaism would become in the future. It is a culmination of the themes that had been developing in the religion in response to the threats of the previous few centuries.[28] The stories that were collected into this canon, and the way in which they were included, emphasize the concerns that were so important in this time period. They describe the pattern of Yahweh giving commandments from the beginning, the continual disobedience of mankind and subsequent punishment, and the formation of Yahweh's chosen people with a law that would define and govern them. Of supreme importance to the Jews who had returned from exile in their current precarious state was an understanding of their nature as Yahweh's chosen people and of what they must do to maintain his favor.

In the narratives of the Pentateuch, contemporary Jews would have seen a reflection of their current condition. It would have been both a message of warning and of comfort and encouragement. Their forefathers had betrayed Yahweh's covenant and disobeyed his commandments from the beginning, for which they had repeatedly been punished; but there was always a restoration, a reconciliation of the people with their god.

Turning now back to the narrative of the flood, which is the primary focus of this article, we will examine it alongside post-exilic writings which reflect the Jews' view of their position. Writings contemporary to the time period in which the final redaction of the flood narrative was canonized can open our eyes to the way in which the Jews may have read the story.

Many post-exilic writings communicate the Jewish interpretation of the exile and the return. The Samuel–Kings history and the Chronicles history both illustrate the ways in which the people of Judah continually disobeyed the law prior to the exile. Late prophetic and poetic writings, such as Psalm 106 and Isaiah 56, employ brief summaries of the nation's history in order to draw attention to its disobedience and Yahweh's justice. Some texts discuss the flood and other primeval and patriarchal stories directly. Ezekiel referenced the righteousness of Noah and other prominent Old Testament figures in order to

28. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, 81–88; Welch, *The Work of the Chronicler: Its Purpose and Its Date* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 123; Torry, "The Chronicler as Editor and as Independent Narrator," *AJSL* 25 (1909): 157, 163–72.

The Jewish religion as we see it in the Old Testament is more likely a reflection of post-exilic ideals than of what the Israelite religion really looked like in earlier time periods. See W. L. Wardle, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 127.

teach the Jews that they would not be saved by merit of the obedience of their ancestors (Ezek 14:12–20). In these writings, it becomes clear that the Jews saw their current situation as a repetition of a pattern that had happened in the history of Yahweh's chosen people since the beginning of the world.

Recorded in Nehemiah chapters 8–10 is a particularly clear summary of this Jewish reflection on the events of the exile and the return. We earlier mentioned this passage in reference to the canonization of the Pentateuch by Ezra. Ezra returned to Jerusalem in the mid-fifth century (evidently on orders from Persia) and led the Jews in a festival for the renewal of their covenant with Yahweh. Nehemiah 8 tells us of the law being read to all the people in Jerusalem and their renewed devotion to it. Chapter 9 is in the voice of the whole congregation as they reflect upon the law they have just heard and their ancestors' disobedience to it.

There are similar literary elements in both of these narratives: the importance of strict obedience to the law, the consequences of disobedience, the preservation of a righteous remnant, the establishment of a covenant. They both explain the relationship between Yahweh and his covenant people, Israel. Unlike the gods of all the other nations, Yahweh is very concerned with the moral state of his nation and with their fidelity to him. The covenant status that the Israelite nation enjoys is conditional upon their obedience to his commands.[29] Because these two passages deal with similar concerns, Nehemiah 8–10 will provide us with a post-exilic context by which to examine Genesis 6–9.

Both narratives start with patterns of creation.[30] Genesis 1 and 2 recount the creation of the heavens, the earth, and mankind on it, and are referenced in Nehemiah 9:6. Another creation took place when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden into a new state of existence. Similarly, after the creation of the world, a covenant family was created through Abraham (Neh 9:7-8). Then another creation took place on Sinai when this covenant people was formed into a nation (Neh 9:9-11). Commandments and instructions were then given to guide them. Adam and Eve were told to multiply and to subdue the earth; the Jews in Nehemiah 9 tell us that God gave their ancestors "right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments . . . and a law through [his] servant Moses" (vv. 13–14). This new creation begins with new instructions and guidance.

29. Jagersma, *History of Israel,* 185–86; Wardle, *History and Religion of Israel,* 164–68.

30. See Clines' theory of a "creation, uncreation, re-creation" theme in the Pentateuch. *The Theme of the Pentateuch,* 73–76; Blenkinsopp also makes a similar observation. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*, 85.

The chapters leading up to the account of the flood recount the increasing disobedience of mankind as a whole.[31] Mankind has taken the commands to multiply and to subdue the earth and has corrupted them. The first violent instance of this is Cain, who subdues his brother by shedding his blood upon the earth (Gen 4:10–11). Because he has corrupted God's instructions, Cain is now told that the earth will no longer submit to him (v. 12), but that is as far as the punishment goes. God forbids the rest of mankind from killing Cain (v. 15), hoping that mankind will have learned from its mistakes and will not become further corrupted.

The same pattern can be seen in Nehemiah 9 as the people continue their narration of the history of Israel. God brought their ancestors out of Egypt, and provided for them; but they "acted presumptuously," "refused to obey," and "were not mindful of the wonders" God had done for them (Neh 9:16–17). Nevertheless, the assembly of the Jews tells us, even when the Israelites began to worship idols instead of the God who had delivered them, he "in [his] great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness" (vv. 17–18). He continued to lead and provide for them.[32]

Chapter 5 of Genesis is a genealogy, showing that God did indeed allow Adam's descendants to fill the whole earth. Likewise, the Israelites were brought into the land of Canaan, where God "multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven" (Neh 9:22–25). Unfortunately, however, in both cases they also multiplied in wickedness.

The next stage of our pattern brings us to the point where the narrative of the Flood begins. Mankind had now become "filled with violence" (Gen 6:11) to a point that God could no longer allow it to continue. Looking upon all the inhabitants of the world he had created, he saw only eight lonely souls who were still intent on obeying him.[33] As this complete rebellion undermined his purposes for creation, it was necessary that the earth be wiped clean to start over from the obedient remnant.[34]

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31. David J. Clines observes that a theme of the Pentateuch is sin of mankind, justice of God, then mercy of God. *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 61–65.

32. Forrest, "Paradise Lost Again," 8–9.

33. By reflecting on the words of prophets such as Ezekiel, we come to the conclusion that the final redactor of the text took this to mean that every human being on the earth at that time, aside from Noah and his family, was wicked enough to merit divine punishment, rather than the whole world being punished for the sins of one group, as some have inferred from the episode of Genesis 6:1–4. See Ezekiel 14:14.

34. It seems that the earth itself is a key character in both the narratives of the flood and the exile. In Genesis 6, violence is tied directly to the earth: "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth" (Gen 6:5); "the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth" (Gen 6:6); "the earth was filled with violence" (Gen 6:11); "all flesh had

Likewise, throughout the history of Israel, the people of God became steadily more disobedient and full of idolatry.[35] Nehemiah 9:30 tells us that God was patient with his people's disobedience for many years. He sent prophets to warn them, but they wouldn't listen. Looking back, the Jews who have returned from exile acknowledge: "our kings, our officials, our priests, and our ancestors have not kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them." (Neh 9:34) This disobedience undermines God's plan for his holy people.[36]

So God purged wickedness on both occasions and allowed a righteous remnant to return to the land and start again.[37] In the case of the Flood, that righteous remnant consisted of eight obedient souls (Gen 6:18), while the return from the Exile was the small repentant percentage of the population that had before been in the land (Neh 9:31). The principle was the same in either case: only obedient individuals will escape the wrath of God.[38]

The preservation of the righteous remnant was followed in both cases by observance to the correct ritual procedures. The first thing we hear of Noah doing after leaving the ark is offering sacrifice to God (Gen 6:20). Likewise, the highest priority for the Jews returning from the exile was the building of the temple in order to continue offering sacrifice. Following this act, they recommitted to the commandments God had given them before. In the same way that the Jews who had returned from Exile committed again to follow the law they had been given through Moses,[39] God repeated to Noah the first commandment he had given to Adam and Eve: to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen 9:1). In both cases, this reassertion of a commandment emphasizes that the people before the destruction had failed to appropriately carry out that commandment. It also warns the survivors to do better.

In their return from exile, God's people had fresh in their mind the results of their previous disobedience. Like the human race at the time of Noah, the

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corrupted its way upon the earth" (Gen 6:12). So also the Chronicler informs us that the earth is an intimately concerned character who has been deprived by generations of the Israelite people of the restful Sabbaths which are its due (2 Chr 36:21). See Forrest's analysis of the role of the earth, "Paradise Lost Again," 4–8.

35. Blenkinsopp observes the similarity between the theme of increase of sin in the Pentateuch and exilic and post-exilic prophecy. *The Pentateuch,* 76–79; see also Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch,* 145–63.

36. Clines is of the opinion that in the flood narrative, exilic Jews projected themselves back into history, comparing the destruction by water for wickedness with the destruction of Jerusalem for disobedience. *The Theme of the Pentateuch,* 98.

37. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch,* 98.

38. Skinner, *Commentary on Genesis,* 151–58; Castel, *History of Israel and Judah,* 136–62.

39. Summarized in Nehemiah 10.

kingdom of Judah had become full of wickedness. God again sent destruction upon them, and in like manner allowed a remnant to continue on and start anew. We read in Genesis 9 about the new covenant God made with Noah and the new commandments he gave him. These commandments pave the way for the full law of God to be given in the last four books of the Pentateuch. It was upon the proper observance of these new commandments that mankind's standing before God would henceforth be determined. Likewise, the returnees from exile recognized that their preservation or destruction was wholly contingent upon their obedience to the law.[40]

A reading from the perspective of contemporaries to the final form of the flood narrative shows the determination of the post-exilic Jews to define who they were and what it meant to be part of a covenant with God. At a time when it would have been easy to assume that their god had forsaken them, or that he didn't have the power that the gods of the pagan nations surrounding them had, this people instead accepted the conclusion that it was they who had betrayed God and that they had suffered the necessary consequences. Obedience to the law became the primary focus of Judaism. It was a symbol of their standing with God. Judaism had a perspective on its own history that was unique among other Canaanites and Mesopotamians: they recognized and acknowledged their own disobedient and rebellious nature. This allowed them to survive debilitating defeats, seeing these not as the supremacy of other nations, but rather as the just response of their god to their own wickedness. In this light, as long as they changed their ways and returned to full obedience to Yahweh's laws, they were sure to regain his favor and blessing.

Jewish literature from the exile and later was meant to teach the proper relationship between the mortal and the divine. Mankind was to be dependent on God. But as the deluge account and the captivity of the Judahites show us, mankind often rebels against its proper role. They depend upon themselves rather than upon God and disregard his instructions until his purposes become thwarted. The flood sent by God was never meant to be a complete eradication of mankind from the earth, just as the Exile was never meant to be a permanent destruction of the covenant people. Rather it was a new start, a recreation. This time, God's covenant people were to start from that remnant who, unlike their fathers before them, would be completely and unquestioningly obedient to their god.

40. See Nehemiah 10:29.