PARALLEL GUIDE 6

The Flood

Summary: This chapter unravels the two traditions comprising the story of the Flood and compares them to contemporaneous myths of deluge. It emphasizes the way Noah's blessings and the curse on his sons theologically explain Israel's later relationship with her neighbors. It also reviews the flood story's implied theology of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption.

Learning Objectives

• Read Genesis chapters 6:9-9

• Learn the difference between the Old Testament's meaning of "righteous" and our understanding of that concept today

• State the relationship between the P account of the Flood and the P account of Creation

• Identify the three main points made by the combined P and J story of the Flood

• State the "theological issue" behind the story of the sons of Noah

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Define the following terms in your notebook: doctrinal statements, covenant, righteous (in Hebrew, tsadiq), providence

2. What is the significance of the number seven?

3. Use your notebook. Date the page and entitle it "Meditation." As you read Genesis 9:1-17, record your thoughts and reactions.

Taking a few deep breaths, let yourself relax and be silent. Stay quiet for a few moments. When you are ready, read the passage over slowly, line by line, phrase by phrase. Read it once, then return to the silence with your eyes closed. After a few moments read the passage again and return to the silence. Repeat the cycle a third time.

After remaining quiet for a time, record your thoughts and reactions. Do this uncritically. Simply write what you have experienced.

Write a short paragraph on what the passage means to you.

4. Look for parallel stories of cataclysmic tradition in other religious traditions. What do they have in common with the Old Testament in the way these tradi- tions were interpreted by following generations?

Preparing for Your Seminar

• What are some of the present-day thoughts about the likelihood of total destruction from nuclear war, environmental pollution, and/or population explosion? How would you relate them to the story of the Flood?

• How do you interpret God's providence?

Additional Sources

For another “flood” story from ancient times, see D. Winton Thomas, ed., Documents From Old Testament Times (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) pp. 17-26. Here a portion of the Gilgamesh Epic is translated along with a helpful introduction and instructive notes.

THE FLOOD

There are two flood stories interwoven in Gen. 6-9. The J story is the earlier one. It is filled with the kind of detail that makes a story interesting. The P account, as is usual with this writer, is more doctrinal. P is always interested in teaching the mature faith of Israel. Up to this point we have separated the various sources only casually, because it was usually quite clear which one we were dealing with. It is important that the two sources, J and P, be clearly marked off from each other so that we can see the characteristics of each story. Before we begin the chapter itself, take your Bible and two different colored pens or pencils and mark a line down the margin to indicate the material that belongs to each source.

With the pen you are using to mark the P source, put a line alongside the following verses (remember, letters a or b indicate the first or second half of a verse): 6:9-22; 7:6, 11, 13-16a, 17a, 18-21, 24; 8:1-2a, 3b, 4, 5, 7 (there is some disagreement about this verse), 13a, 15-19; 9:1-17. Mark all the rest through the end of chapter 9 as the J source. Read the present form of the story, with the two sources mixed, from 6:9 through 9:17. This will give you the picture that the final editor wanted you to have. When you have finished this, go back and read the P story as you have it marked, and then the J story. This will show you the differences between the two treatments of the story of Noah.

Many cultures have “flood stories” in their traditions. Geologists have found from a study of layers of rock that, though greater than normal floods have occurred from time to time, worldwide floods precede human memory. Sedimentary evidence indicates that large local floods were not uncommon in the Middle East after human society existed there. A Babylonian flood story has been discovered, and translations of it can be found in many Old Testament textbooks. It is very similar in many ways to the Old Testament stories of the Flood. For a while, especially in the last century, Old Testament scholars thought that the Old Testament writers might have used the Babylonian myth as the basis for their accounts. Detailed study of the stories has now convinced most scholars that this is not the case, but that there was an earlier story used by both the Old Testament writers and the Babylonians. This original source is believed to have been a Sumerian story. The Sumerians were an ancient people who settled in the Tigris-Euphrates basin and built cities there long before the Babylonians came on the scene.

The Tradition of Flood Stories

The Babylonian Flood Story

The Babylonian story is contained in the Gilgamesh Epic, named for its hero. In this flood story, Gilgamesh is speaking to Utnapishtim, a man who has been turned into a god, and asks him how he became a god. Utnapishtim explains that this was his reward for what he did during the great flood and proceeds to tell the story.

Many of the gods were living in a city on the bank of the Euphrates when a dispute arose among them. Apparently some of the gods were doing evil of some sort. The “great gods” decided to bring on a deluge, but one of the gods warned Utnapishtim to build a great ship and to save animals and people from the flood. Enlil, a war-god, was the leader of those who were going to destroy the earth, and Ea was the god who was trying to save it.

Utnapishtim built the ship according to the detailed instructions given him by Ea, loaded it with his relatives and family, animals, and the skilled workers who had built it—and the rains came. The gods were terrified and fled from the city. After seven days the storm let up and eventually the ship ran aground on the top of

Mount Nisir, where it remained for seven more days. Utnapishtim let loose a dove and then a swallow, both of which came back to the ship, and finally a raven, which found a dry place on which to land. Then they all disembarked and offered a sacrifice, which the gods found pleasant-smelling.

The gods then scolded Enlil for doing this terrible thing. Ea said, "How, O how couldst thou without reflection bring on this deluge? On the sinner lay his sin; on the transgressor lay his transgression!" It was the gods, not humankind, who had angered Enlil. Yet, with no sense of contradiction, Ea also said that it would have been all right to have sent a wolf, a famine, or one of the lesser gods to torment humankind—but a flood was too much! For his part in saving some of humankind and the animals, Utnapishtim was made into a god: "Hitherto Utnapishtim has been but a man; but now Utnapishtim and his wife shall be like unto us gods. In the distance, at the mouth of the rivers, Utnapishtim shall dwell!"

The Babylonian story has obvious points of similarity to the P flood story: detailed instructions about building the ark, a mountain, a raven that finds dry land, and a final statement from the gods (or God). Likely P used a story which was common to the ancient peoples and which was also the source of the Utnapishtim story.

The P Flood Story

The differences between the P story and the Babylonian one are quite striking. The P document begins at Gen. 1:1-2:4 and then goes to Gen. 5 for the genealogy that brings us from Adam to Noah before picking up at 6:9 with the story of the Flood. It has a character of its own. If the J writer strings stories together to show the spread of sin through the world after the fall in the garden, P also has a point to make. To do so P takes an old myth about creation and turns it into a doctrinal statement about the sovereignty of God, about God's creation of the cosmos, and about creation of humankind in God's own image. P has used an ancient genealogical table to bring the story of humankind down to the age of Noah, who is described as a righteous man. Then P uses another ancient myth about a flood, not to speak of a dispute among the gods in which human beings are caught as innocent bystanders, but to discuss the corruption that has occurred in God's creation through human hands. The ancient story is used to express God's continuing sovereignty, as well as the grace by which God begins creation anew, though under the changed circumstances which corruption has brought about.

P is aware of the ancient stories. They had circulated in the religious shrines for centuries. But P has carefully reworked them so that they are no longer stories about the gods—with humankind merely tossed about according to their whims—they are stories of God's actions toward humankind and the world.

Noah is referred to in verse 9 as a "righteous" man who "walked with God." We have already noticed that P's genealogical list in chapter 5 spoke of Enoch as "walking with God," and we commented that this expression is never used in speaking of anyone after Noah.

Genesis 6:9-22

When we hear this word "righteous," we may tend to think it means moral perfection. We have been taught as Christians that Jesus was "sinless," and we have also been taught about the many ways in which sin can enter our lives almost unnoticed. For example, we can be guilty of anger, and so go against Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which says that being angry with one's brother is as much a breaking of God's law as murder is. Psalm 130, a cry to God for mercy which is familiar to many Christians, says, "If you, O Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?" (The Book of Common Prayer version of the Psalm). No one is so perfect as to measure up to the absolute standards of God. But the word "righteous" does not have such an absolute meaning in its Old Testament usage.

There is really no good English word to translate the Hebrew for righteous. It describes animals that are suitable for sacrifice: they are animals without any blemishes that would lower their value. One does not

offer to God something that one does not want for oneself. When used to describe a person, it means that the person has done the things that are right in the circumstances: when neighbors are in need, the righteous help them; they do not cut down all of the harvest so the poor have nothing to glean, but leave a little standing in the corners of the field; they conform to the religious cultic rules, doing the religious duties properly; they do not steal, kill, or in other ways harm anyone. In short, they "fit" into God's creation. They do not break the relationships between God and neighbor or disrupt God's intended order. Therefore, they are "suitable" to God.

This kind of "righteousness" is less severe than the soul-searching that is involved in our more inward-looking ideas about sin. One can become so aware of the mixture of reasons for doing even good things that one cannot call them "good" in any absolute sense. This is not what is involved in the notion of tsadiq (Hebrew for "righteousness"). Yet the fact that, in the Old Testament, no one since Noah has been called "righteous" to the extent of "walking with God" is a harsher comment than it would be if "righteousness" meant moral perfection. Even in outward acts, in things that can be clearly seen, humankind has constantly disrupted relationships with other people and with God. Noah was, by these standards, righteous and "blameless." He stands in sharp contrast with the rest of humankind.

Though P's story does not include the fall, verses 11 and 12 say that the earth was corrupt and filled with violence, and that all flesh had "corrupted their way upon the earth." The word "violence" is the strongest word used up to this point for describing the disruption that sin has caused. J has described acts of murder, of wholesale vengeance, as well as divine-human corruption; P sums it all up with one word, "violence." We should keep in mind that P's narration has moved very quickly from the creation story, in which God at each stage looked at what was made and called it "good." Now, all is "corrupt" because of violence.

Although P and J have developed their narratives in quite different ways—P summing up the theology of creation, sin, and judgment in a very few words and J telling a series of stories about creation, sin, and judgment—they are in basic agreement. God's creation has been spoiled by human sin, and God has decided to destroy it; but the destruction will not be complete—Noah will be treated differently. P calls Noah "righteous," and J says that he "found favor in the sight of the LORD" (6:8). We see a slight difference between the two writers' views about Noah's relationship with God, but they agree that God does something very new and very important in his dealings with Noah. In the P narrative, Noah is commanded to build an ark, and is given specific instructions on how to do it. God explains the reason for the ark: God is going to bring about a flood that will destroy all living creatures, but will make a covenant with Noah. Noah is to bring his family, including his sons' wives, into the ark and two of every kind of animal, as well as a supply of food (all of which would be vegetable food, since nothing with nephesh is yet allowed to eat anything else with nephesh).

Genesis 7:6, 11, 13-16a, 17a, 18-21, 24

In these verses we have P's version of the coming of the Flood. Verses 6 and 11, and later 8:4, are quite specific about dates. The treatment is theological, a statement of the doctrine and teaching of Israel, but P also understands God's dealings with humankind as taking place in specific events at definite times. P does not make general statements about God.

When God brings the Flood, it is by letting loose those waters of chaos which had been divided by the firmament and kept in place beneath the earth. It is not a rainstorm, but a reversal of creation that is taking place. Notice that God sees in 6:12 that the earth has become corrupt. Human violence not only has upset human relationships, but also has spoiled creation, so that God has to destroy the earth, not just humankind. In verses 19 and 20 the "dry land" which God had caused to appear in the process of creation once again becomes covered with the waters of the deep. All flesh dies also. Except for Noah and those with him in the ark, all is as it was before creation.

Genesis 8:1-2a, 3b-5, 7, 13a, 15-19

“But God remembered Noah.” This expression is used again and again in the Old Testament to refer to God’s love and attention. It does not mean that God had forgotten about Noah and it comes suddenly to God’s mind that Noah is there in the midst of the destruction; it means that God has now turned God’s attention from the judgment which God was bringing upon creation and has begun his work of salvation. For God to “remember” is for God to act in a particular way, in grace toward creation.

The account that follows shows a re-creation, a new creation, much in the same way that Gen. 1-2:4a describes the original creation. God makes a wind blow (the word is the same as that used for the “storm” or “tempest,” usually translated “spirit,” as it blows over the deep in 1:2) and the waters begin to subside. Then is described the appearance of dry land and the repopulation of the earth with the birds, animals, creeping things, and human beings.

Even before the dry land appears, while there is still only the chaos of the Flood, the ark “came to rest” on the mountains of Ararat. “Came to rest” is a pun on Noah’s name, which means “rest.” It is not strictly speaking “Mount Ararat,” but the mountains of Ararat, and the mountains apparently grounded the ship before becoming visible. Scholars believe that verse 7, about the sending out of the raven, is from P. A raven appears in the Babylonian story, as do a dove and a swallow. The J story, 8:8-12, has a dove which, as in the Babylonian story, is sent out to see if there is any dry land. In three different flights the dove first finds no place to land, then finds an olive leaf, showing that the tops of trees are beginning to appear, and finally does not return, showing that there is dry land on which to alight. The raven, in verse 7, simply flies about until the waters dry up. The placement of this verse before the flights of the dove, a part of the old tradition, was not done seamlessly as we might expect of a competent editor today. This might be a good place to pause and remember that none of the Bible was written according to late twentieth-century ideas of what literature should be.

When the dry land has appeared, Noah and his passengers do not just go out of the ark on their own. God commands Noah to go out and to bring all the animals “. . . so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (8:17). This is still God’s act of re-creation; the judgment has passed, and the new creation is taking place. The language itself, with its repetitions of the kinds of creatures, reminds us of Gen. 1:1-2:4a (see especially 1:22, 28).

Verses 1-7 describe the new conditions in the new creation. God blesses Noah and his sons and renews the command to be fruitful and multiply. This much, at least, is as it was before the judgment. But there are important differences between the creation as it is now, after the Flood, and as it was before. First, all forms of animal life will now fear human beings. The violence which brought on the judgment has left its mark on humankind, and all life shall live in fear of this violence. Second, humans may now eat meat as well as vegetable life. Is this simply God’s accepting the fact that we are violent and allowing it? The P writer is describing the world as it is: animals do fear people, and humankind does eat meat, even though no such violence can be imagined as part of the original intentions of God in creation. P is simply stating the fact that, although in the original design of God (as in the future visions of God’s eventual kingdom) violence of any kind is out of place, God has given humankind permission to eat meat. But the sacredness of life itself is still maintained: humankind is not to eat flesh with the blood in it. Blood is life, and life belongs to God.

Genesis 9:1-17

No human life is to be taken without punishment. Even if an animal kills a human, its life is to be taken. So also a man’s life should be taken, if he kills another man, or a woman’s, if she kills another woman. The most remarkable part of this new provision which God makes is that humankind is to act as God’s representative in carrying out the judgment: “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” (9:6). Because of the rhythm of this saying, which comes through even in the English translation, it is thought to be a very ancient one. Putting it in the mouth of God is probably an etiological comment by the P writer; it accounts for the fact that, at the time P was living,

punishment for murder was carried out by human beings. The reason why human life may be taken as punishment for murder is that humankind is in the image of God. It is not simply to act as a deterrent to further acts of murder, or as revenge, but by God's command and as God's judgment against acts done against his own image.

Verses 8-17 describe the covenant God makes with Noah. This is the first mention of a covenant between humanity and God. In the covenant with Abraham and in the Sinai covenant with Israel through Moses, God narrows down his saving acts to the people of Israel. In these covenants God takes the initiative and sets the terms for the covenant. Humans accept these terms as response. In the covenant with Noah there are no terms to which human beings can respond. It is entirely an act of God's grace, promising never again to destroy the earth by water. The covenant is with all humanity. The P writer is, etiologically, accounting for the fact that the world is dependable. Why should the world be so, when human violence is so great? Why does God not lose patience again and again? The answer is that, since God has spoken in judgment in the flood, God has promised to preserve the world in spite of human violence.

This whole section (9:1-17) explains some puzzling facts of life—the fear which animals have of people, society's meat-eating habits, the continuance of violence and the human execution of judgment against it, and the continuing graciousness of nature. This is God's new ordering of creation. It takes human violence into account, not approving of it, but arranging the creation in such a way as to permit it with the least harm until God brings in the final fulfillment.

The J Flood Story

The J flood story really begins in 6:5-8 in the last chapter as the climax of J's account of the spread of evil. It is a programmatic comment on the meaning of the stories J has been telling.

The J story has no instructions to Noah to build the ark. The account in the P tradition was apparently regarded by the editor as sufficient for the story with the two sources woven together. Why the editor removed the parallel account in this spot, while keeping many other parallels, we do not know. (Another reminder: our use of the word "editor" is something of an analogy. We do not know how the biblical materials were actually compiled or according to what literary standards.) As it stands now, even supposing we had J's version of the instructions, a strange fact seems to emerge: God does not explain to Noah why the ark is to be built until after its completion. Only in 7:4 does God explain that it will rain for forty days and forty nights. Apparently Noah built a ship on dry land far inland for no other reason than that God had told him to do so! This is the same kind of trust in God that the J writer will describe Abraham as showing (Gen. 12:1-4a): radical obedience to YHWH, without knowing in advance the wisdom of God's command.

Noah is instructed to take seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean ones. Similarly, seven pairs of birds are to be taken. "Clean" and "unclean" refer to later dietary laws—what foods may be eaten and what may not—even though at the time of the Flood, no animals could be eaten. "Clean" animals are also the only ones appropriate to offer as sacrifices, and Noah will make a sacrifice upon leaving the ark after the Flood has receded. J plays on the number seven quite frequently; for example, the rain will come in seven days. In ancient traditions seven was often thought of as the number of perfection or completion.

In this section, Noah carries out God's instructions, and the rains come. The J writer is more "naturalistic" in the description of the event than P. Instead of describing the Flood in theological terms, the reversal of cosmic creation, J has God work through natural rain.

Genesis 7:7-10, 12, 16b, 17b, 22-23

The little clause in 16b is tacked onto the end of the P description of the loading of the ark, but the use of the name "Lord" shows it to be J's wording. Similarly, 22-23 has wording which suggests the J creation story—the "breath of life," which in 2:7 is said to have been breathed by God into "Man," is used here to refer to all

living creatures.

The main feature of this section is the detailed account of how Noah finds out when the waters have receded enough to expose the dry land. He sends the dove out three times until finally it fails to return, having found a place to land. This kind of suspenseful detail makes a good story.

Genesis 8:2b-3, 6, 8-12, 13b-14

The J story has Noah build an altar to YHWH and offer sacrifice, instead of a covenant, as P's account. The Babylonian story also has a sacrifice at this point, and refers to the odor as being pleasing to the gods. In the Gilgamesh Epic, Utnapishtim says, "The gods smelled the savor, the gods smelled the sweet savor. The gods gathered like flies over the sacrifice." It seems strange that, although the Babylonian myths speak of humankind as mere slaves to the gods, there is none of the awe and utter respect for the gods which the Bible shows toward YHWH. Sometimes, as here, the Babylonian language borders on contempt. The Babylonians may have feared the gods, but it was with a kind of fear different from that which the awesome holiness of YHWH produced.

J uses the old tradition of a sacrifice, but here it becomes a sign that on the newly cleansed earth, the worship of God is to be the first act—a kind of pledge of faithfulness to YHWH. God's response to the sacrifice is strange: God promises never again to curse the ground "because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth . . ." (8:21). It was this evil imagination which made God decide to bring on the Flood in the first place; why is it now used as a reason not to curse the ground again? There is no answer to this question, probably because J does not think in such exclusively logical terms. J, as is the case for all the writers whose work we have been reading in Genesis, is more interested in theology than in answering all logical questions. What J does say is that the Flood has not removed the evil thoughts of the heart of humankind. In spite of this, God promises that the regular order of the seasons will be reestablished and that life will go on. "In spite of" is a phrase that one must continually use when speaking of God's grace. The P conclusion to the story, the making of the covenant, also implies the condition "in spite of." In spite of human violence, creation is reestablished. Israel will interpret much of her life in terms of this understanding of God's grace. By separating the stories of J and P, we are able to see each one in its entirety and to notice some differences between them. The editor uses the longer P account as the main framework for the combined story, weaving J's story into it. Sometimes the accounts are paralleled, making it confusing if one follows the details carefully. The reasons for the Flood are repeated in two different forms, the numbers of animals taken on the ark are different, the sources of the waters for the Flood are different, the length of time is not the same, and the conclusions differ. Sometimes the editor takes a single phrase from J and puts it into the P section.

In spite of the confusions within this presentation, the points of the combined story are quite clear. First of all, sin has so completely distorted God's creation that God all but destroys the creation in judgment against it. Just as in the other judgments God has allowed life to go on, so here God saves part of the creation in order to start anew. Israel's experiences of God were such that she could never believe that God would completely destroy the creation. Though the judgment might be extremely severe, God would still redeem something from it.

A second point is that humankind remains evil. The effects of sin last. It is a remarkable feature of Hebrew thought about God and humankind that no matter how high and exalted a picture of God might be painted, humankind still remains important. We are in the image of God; this means not only that we are capable of great things, but that our evil is taken seriously by God. In contrast with a worldview which represents human beings as victims of fate, so that neither good nor evil acts matter, the Bible shows an understanding of the creation in which God takes seriously what we do. It is this that makes it possible for humankind to spoil God's creation; it is this that makes judgment for sin necessary; but it is also this that calls forth God's mercy. Finally, the story makes clear not only that humankind is still evil, but also that the condition of the world has changed because of God's action. It is impossible to go back to the original state of creation. J has

described the cherubim guarding the entrance to Eden. Just as clearly, the flood story at the hands of P shows us a world which is changed in such a way that the age before Noah can never be entered again. Violence is now part of the picture, and the innocence of a world in which animals and humans could live together in peace cannot be regained, until, as Isaiah would prophesy, the earth is remade in a finally and completely redeemed form.

The Blessings and Curse of Noah

We finish this chapter by looking at the strange little story by the J writer concerning Noah's sons. **Read Gen. 9:18-29.**

The sons of Noah were mentioned earlier in the P story at 6:10. We hear nothing further about them after that—except that they and their wives were with Noah on the ark—until we get to this section. Nevertheless, they will figure very highly in the next chapter, in which we discuss the "table of nations," a listing that traces their descendants.

In order to understand the significance of this episode, we must turn our attention to the situation which the Israelites experienced after they had settled in the land of Canaan. God promised Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that God would give the whole land to Israel; however, this never quite happened. When the Israelites invaded Canaan after their escape from slavery in Egypt, they conquered much of the land and subdued the people who were living there. These people are usually referred to in the Bible as the Canaanites (sometimes the Amorites). We read of attempts to eliminate these people entirely, but in fact most of them remained. A more serious problem for the theology of Israel, however, was another people whom Israel was unable to defeat. The Philistines lived along the coast of Palestine. (The name "Palestine" is linguistically the same as "Philistine.") The Philistines were a seafaring people, perhaps from the island of Crete, though because they are depicted with blue eyes in Egyptian tomb paintings, some would place their origins as far away as Macedonia. They have been linked with the fall of Troy as well. There were many battles between the Israelites and the Philistines, and it was the need to unite in the face of this very powerful enemy that led Israel to seek a king—even though the office of king had never been part of their way of life before. In spite of the victories of King Saul and King David, the Israelites could not defeat the Philistines. In the end, the two peoples developed a "peaceful coexistence," and the Philistines remained along the coastal strip.

Why, if God had promised the land to Israel, was she unable to defeat the Philistines? We must understand that this was not simply a matter of national pride. It was a theological problem. Could it mean that YHWH was not strong enough to defeat the gods of the Philistines? If this were the case, Israel's whole belief in YHWH would be in danger, for the Israelites had not simply come to regard YHWH as their god; they had come to believe that YHWH was the only God, before whom the gods of the other nations were simply idols—not gods at all, but only the works of human hands. Psalm 115:4-8 ridicules the idols of "the nations":

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk.
They make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

If this were so, why did YHWH not lead the forces of Israel to victory over the idolatrous Philistines? The story of the invasion of Palestine is full of accounts in which the weaker forces of Israel were victorious over stronger forces—because YHWH gave them the victory. YHWH was stronger than the ridiculous idols of every other enemy. Later, when Israel and Judah were conquered by the empires of Assyria and Babylon, the prophets interpreted this as YHWH's act in judgment against the faithlessness of the people. This still did not explain Israel's failure to defeat the Philistines.

The Sons of Noah

The brief story about Noah and his sons is an attempt to deal with this theological problem. It is not simply an etiological story. It is an attempt to account theologically for the political situation in Canaan. Shem, Ham, and Japheth are the sons of Noah. Verse 18 tells us that Ham is the father of Canaan. The reader of the story is supposed to know that Israel is descended from Shem; strangely enough the "table of nations" in the next chapter only hints at this, but it is made clear in 11:10-26. Japheth is the ancestor of the Philistines. (See 10:5; the "coastland people" were the Philistines.) Thus the three sons stand for the Israelites, the Canaanites, and the Philistines.

Verses 18 and 19 only serve to account for the populating of the earth after the Flood. Verse 20 begins the story which is the real reason for bringing the names in. Noah is described as the first tiller of the soil. (The writer evidently forgets or ignores that in Genesis the soil was tilled by those whom God created and that Cain was a farmer!) He plants a vineyard and discovers wine. Not only does he discover wine, but he also discovers its effects—he becomes drunk! The story is not told to discredit Noah, even though a curse is, in the end, to come from this scene. The prediction in 5:29—that Noah would bring relief from the work of toiling—has been fulfilled.

Noah "lay uncovered in his tent." Ham sees his father's nakedness and tells his two brothers. Then the two brothers walk backward into the tent—so that they will not see their father—and cover him up. Is it only their father's possible embarrassment that is at issue here? Perhaps, but in view of the severe curse which Noah lays on Ham (or rather on Canaan, Ham's son), we suspect that there was more to the story. Possibly some sexual act was done by Ham to his father which the readers of the story were supposed to know about and which was omitted. We don't really know.

When Noah wakes up, he pronounces the curse on Ham's son and the blessing on his other two sons. This psalm (vv. 25-27) was probably an ancient one which J inserted into this story. In its setting here, it seems forced: Ham has done something evil, but Canaan is cursed. The information in the early part of the story, that Canaan is Ham's son, does not explain Noah's cursing his grandson rather than his guilty son.

The song is used in this setting, however, to deal specifically with a theological problem. Canaan, representing the people whom the Israelites conquered in the invasion of Palestine, is to be "a slave of slaves" to Israel (and also to the Philistines). The expression "a slave of slaves" is very emphatic. Verse 26 can read either "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem" or "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem." Either way, Shem (Israel) is named as the people who have YHWH as their God, and a blessing—direct or indirect—is spoken to them. Canaan is given as Israel's slave. Finally, Japheth is blessed ("enlarge" refers to having many children, which is always a sign of blessing in the Old Testament) and is allowed to "live in the tents of Shem," which means to share the land with Israel. Canaan is to be his slave as well.

In this way J answers the problem: the Philistines were promised permission to share the land with Israel as early as Noah's time. Israel, however, was destined to have YHWH as her God even then. This may not sound like a convincing argument to you.

It is obviously an instance of "reading back" a later situation into history. (Though the psalm is very old, it has to be from a time after this situation had developed.) But Old Testament writers could not believe that something had happened that was not as God must have willed. The situation with the Philistines was as it was; therefore God willed it. To report God as having said this was not to be looked on as dishonest reporting, but simply as stating a theological truth!

There are other answers given to the same problem. In the books of Joshua and the Judges it is argued that God has allowed the Philistines to remain in the land in order to keep Israel from getting soft and overconfident. The important thing is that the Hebrews had to look for such answers, because Israel always thought of God as active in the world. Humankind also acts, and, as we have said, its actions are taken

seriously and have their effects. God alone controls the creation—he is Lord over it. Therefore, to the Hebrew mind, everything that happens must be in some way God's doing.

This becomes a very difficult position to maintain. For example, is human sin God's doing? Clearly it is not, but the immediate judgment which it brings with it is God's doing. The "wrong-headed" actions of some people, however, are seen as caused by God: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" during the days of slavery in Egypt. (We see when we study Exodus, that what the translation makes appear simple is really more complex.) Once again, the Hebrew way of dealing with things simply cannot be reduced to pure logic—it is full of paradoxes and the occasional apparent contradiction. But the lordship of God over God's world and over human affairs is consistently asserted, even when it leads to embarrassing results such as the need to explain the continuance of the Philistines in the land. In the view of the Old Testament writers, the sin of humankind has had such an effect on the world that God has brought the terrible judgment of the Flood upon it. Then, in P's account, he recreates it in a changed form as a result of the sinful acts of human beings.

The Theology of the Flood

In the flood story God steps in both to judge and to redeem. God brings destruction on the world by his judgment, but God saves it from total destruction through Noah. We misread this if we concentrate entirely on redemption in this story. We may infer from the story that God will always intercede in the nick of time to keep our sin from completely destroying the world. The point is that human sin does have a drastic effect on the world.

The nature of God's continuing oversight of the world, God's concern for the destiny of God's creation, is referred to in the question of providence. Providence is God's acting to uphold and direct creation. If God both takes human actions seriously enough to allow them to affect the creation, and also wills to direct creation to its fulfillment, then logically God would have either to destroy sinful humankind or redeem it. In the Bible, he does both. He destroys, as in the Flood, and he redeems, as with Noah. What is clear is that redemption does not erase the effects of sin. After Noah the "redeemed" world bears the marks of human sin —the animals fear people, and evil thoughts remain in the heart.

We must include these two thoughts in our understanding of creation: 1) Humankind is taken quite frighteningly seriously! Our dignity as creatures made in the image of God includes the frightening element of unimaginable responsibility. We cannot escape from this responsibility by assuming that God's control over the world frees us to play carelessly in it.

2) God's providence, however it operates, takes into account the things that human beings do. The world after Noah still shows the marks of human sin and, presumably, even in its final redeemed state, it will do so. (The risen Jesus, interpreted by Christians as the first to enter into the final kingdom of God, going ahead to "prepare a place" for us, still has the wounds of crucifixion in his hands, in his feet, and in his side. Although risen, he is still wounded.)

Our dealings with one another cannot be treated lightly. As insignificant as they may seem, they have their effects, and these effects last. Confidence in God's mercy and intent to redeem makes our responsibility bearable. Our confidence cannot be assumed lightly; it cannot mean shrugging off the responsibility of being the image of God in the world.

Sin and Judgment

Most of what we should add to our understanding of these themes flows out of what we have just seen about creation. The tremendous power of sin to destroy, and its judgment, which is really only the inescapable decree of God that such destruction shall take place, are new dimensions to our understanding of sin. For a more complete discussion of this you should look in the Common Lessons and Supporting Materials, Section 4-12.

Immediately after our study of the story of the Fall, we noted that sin is the arrogant, prideful overreaching of the creatures who try to become like gods. Sin is the act of the individual—the woman and the man. And it is directed toward God himself in the disobedience of those who go beyond the limits of their creatureliness. Next, we saw Cain deny his community responsibility toward his brother in the very act of sacrificing to God; we have seen "spiritual" giants, the "sons of the 'elohim," become enmeshed in the fabric of sin; and we have seen the corruption of sin reach so deeply into humankind that every thought, feeling, and act has been spoiled—the "thoughts of the heart" are "only evil continually." From individual disobedience sin has spread to involve the community and the very character of humankind. There is one more major brush-stroke which the Genesis writers will add to this picture of sin: in the story of the Tower of Babel we see sin working at the level of the structures of human society.

It would be impossible, after this development of the theme of sin, to think of it only in terms of "bad things" that people do. Sin is not simply a few bad actions which occur more or less on the surface of life, so that we might go through a whole day, perhaps even longer, having "committed" no sin. Pride, community alienation, and corruption of the heart are, in the point of view of the biblical writers, more than part of the everyday makeup of humankind; by our fallenness they have become part of us. If we do "right"—and the biblical writers are as insistent on our obligation to do so as they are on the fact of sin—it will be through obedience, and not by "doing what comes naturally." The "nature" of humankind, in the true sense of the word, is "good" because we are God's creatures and are in God's image; but what has become "second nature" to us is not to be trusted: the "thoughts of the heart" are "only evil continually"!