

Genesis 6:9-22

Lesson 3

It is not until we actually enter into this section that it becomes apparent why God chose to spare Noah while the remainder of humanity is destroyed. The actions of the flood are a cosmic catastrophe that will actually undo the order of creation and reintroduce disorder once again. The chastisement and the grace of God work together in that; out of this disaster there is salvation and hope for humanity of inhabiting a world cleansed of evil.¹

This new section begins with the *toledoth* (תולדות) formula which is a clear indication of a new section at this point and not at the beginning of chapter 6. Stories of a great flood (cf. note the maps in the article cited here)² are known around the world, but as might be anticipated those that bear the closest affinity to the Genesis account are

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 48.

² Bernhard Lang, "Non-Semitic Deluge Stories and the Book of Genesis: A Biblical and Critical Survey," *Anthropos*, 80 [1985], pp. 605-616.

those that come from the region of Mesopotamia.³ There is as might be expected, a great deal of dispute as to the primacy of the Genesis account over these other accounts. It seems highly probable that these records go back to a common event in the history of these people's memory.

6⁹ This is the story of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.

This section begins with the now familiar phrase (אֵלֶּה) (תּוֹלְדֹת) “these are the generations” or “descendants” of Noah. “This is the story of Noah” is perhaps a better way to translate this. It should be noted that God’s election of Noah is not arbitrary, or capricious, it is connected with the fact that he is declared “righteous.”⁴ This is a very interesting concept at this point in the history of Israel, especially noting that often “righteousness” is described as covenant faithfulness, especially in the context of Romans. As far as we are aware there is no covenant at this point between God

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), pp. 155-159.

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 50.

and Abraham and so something other than covenant
“faithfulness” might be in view here.

Noah does however convey something that demonstrates a contrast between himself and the remainder of humanity. He goes against the flow of the rest of humanity; he is the fully responsive man who accepts creatureliness and perceives God to be God and creature to be creature. Noah appears to be the model of the man of faith that has not yet appeared amongst humanity with the possible exception Enoch in his very brief account.⁵ The term “righteous” (צַדִּיק) occurs for the first time in the biblical literature here.⁶ This root basically “connotes conformity to an ethical standard.” Among the earliest usages of this term it often occurs in relation to judges. All of their decisions are to be made without partiality (Leviticus 19:15). Righteousness can only be exhibited in the biblical sense through conformity to the standards set

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *The Interpretation series* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 79-80.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 133.

out by God.⁷

The term “blameless” (תָּמִים) carries with it the idea of being “complete”.⁸ This noun is normally used in a ritual context referring to a sacrificial animal that is without blemish (Exodus 12:5 and Leviticus 1:3, 10). Only an animal that is “blameless” (תָּמִים) is acceptable to God (Leviticus 22:17-25). When applied to human beings this term acquired a moral dimension that denoted “unblemished” by “moral” fault, therefore a person of impeccable moral character. These two terms are used here in the Bible for the first time with the expectation that the audience would recognize the qualities that are being described here since they are used without definition.⁹

In the face of the corruption that was going on all around him Noah maintained civilized standards of behavior. Ezekiel describes Noah as one of the outstandingly

⁷ Harold G. Stigers, s.v. צַדִּיק in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 752-755.

⁸ J. Barton Payne, s.v. תָּמִים in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 973-974.

⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 50.

righteous men of antiquity. Within rabbinic traditions the concept of being “in his age” is seen as qualifying the standard by not comparing him to people like Abraham. This is in part a criticism of Noah since he did not appear to plead for the salvation of the people of the earth, in the manner that Abraham did for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:23-33).¹⁰ Moses also would plead for the children of Israel after the incident with the golden calf (Exodus 32:11-14) in a similar, or even perhaps more pervasive fashion.

¹⁰ And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Noah has three sons, and this was considered a great blessing and it may be the case that these sons were considered in some way to be righteous too, as they are mentioned before the next verse which speaks of the earth being “corrupt in God’s sight” and being “filled with violence.”

¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 50.

Some have taken the term “earth” (אָרֶץ) here to be indicative of the narrower meaning of the “land” as it is often used as a description of a smaller geographical area such as “the land of Israel” (אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל). This phrase does not occur in the Torah and even in later literature a different word is used for land. The difference in such instances is the qualifying usage of a modifying noun or a modifying context to indicate that it denotes a smaller geographical area rather than the whole of the earth. The first time that the boundaries of the “land” that was promised to Abraham are designated is at Genesis 15:18. The reason this is important is that some would use this latter meaning to indicate that the flood that came upon the “earth” really only came upon the “land,” thus designating a flood of lesser geographical proportions only upon a portion of the earth. This cannot be found in the context in this part of Genesis.

The usage of the term “earth” (אָרֶץ) here is used in an “all inclusive” manner to indicate the extent of man’s

wickedness and corruption. In the next verse the inclusive language will continue with the use of “all flesh.” The totality of evil that occupies the “earth” makes inevitable the totality of the catastrophe that will follow in the destruction of the flood. In other words, if evil has affected all the earth then the destruction will need to be over all the earth, if the evil is local then the flood would only need to reach as far as the evil reaches. The language appears to be very broad and all encompassing so the more natural reading would be to see the flood as covering the whole of the earth since it “was filled with violence.”

12 And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

In verse 12 there are a number of challenges: 1. What does “the earth was corrupt” mean? Does it mean what the phrase after it means, that “all flesh” is corrupt or is it saying that the earth itself has become corrupt? Perhaps it is similar in nature to what Paul wrote about in Romans 8:19-21 where the creation groans because it has been affected by the sinfulness of humanity? 2. Does “all flesh”

include the animals as well as man or does it simply describe mankind? The Jewish rabbis were concerned with this question and in the Talmud at *Sanhedrin* 108a the idea that the animals were also corrupt was expressed by the idea of their intermating with one another. From the regulation given at Genesis 9:5 it would appear that the animals had become carnivorous contrary to the decree of God at 1:30 and so the rabbinic view is that “all flesh” includes all animal life as well as humanity. The utopian visions that are given by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:6-7; 62:25), which envision the animal kingdom as herbivorous, support such a view.¹¹

13 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.

Notice here that God speaks directly to Noah and this direct speech will occur seven times during this narrative. In the accounts of the Mesopotamian gods their decisions

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 51.

were kept secret from man and not shared with mankind. This passage indicates something very different about the nature of God by comparison to accounts that they may have known regarding these other gods. This God communicates plainly and directly with Noah. God makes it plain that He will make an “end” of all flesh, because of the violence. It also is worth noting that God indicates that He is going to destroy “all flesh” “along with the earth.”¹²

This seems to be a clear indication that the earth is corrupt and once again the idea of a universal destruction seems to be the more natural way to take this verse. *Genesis Rabba* 31:7 interprets this verse to mean that the topsoil of the earth is to be physically removed. This interpretation fits the idea that moral corruption physically contaminates the earth, which must then be cleansed or purged.¹³ This ideology would seem to relate to the concepts and teachings that will come in later Leviticus relative to “clean” and “unclean.”

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 51.

¹³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 51.

14 Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make compartments in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

God then gives instructions to Noah for building a structure that will allow him to escape the coming destruction. The vessel that Noah is to build is called a *tevah* (תֵּבָה). This key word will occur seven times in the instructions for the building of the ark and seven further times in connection with the subsidence of the waters. This word will occur in connection with an “ark” only again when it is used of the salvation of the baby Moses in Exodus 2:3-5. The word suggests a boxlike craft that is meant to float on top of the water with no navigational abilities from a rudder or a sail. It has no need of a crew to sail it. This is important because in the Mesopotamian account they build a regular ship that must have a crew to sail it.¹⁴

The term “gopher wood” refers to a type of wood that is really not known for certain, but has commonly been identified as Cypress wood. Whatever type of wood it was,

¹⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 52.

it was likely very durable. Noah is to make cubicles that will later be used to house the animals. The word describing the “pitch” to cover the ark is an unusual word in Hebrew and is very similar to the word used in the Mesopotamian flood accounts.¹⁵

15 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.

The word used here for “cubits” (כַּמָּוֶזֶת) literally means “forearm,” the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger for an average-sized man (cf. Deuteronomy 3:11). The standard biblical cubit is about 18 inches. This would mean the size of the ark would be about 450 feet long, 75 feet in width and 45 feet in height and having a displacement of around 43,000 tons.¹⁶

16 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.

¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 52.

¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 52.

This verse gives some instructions that are uncertain to us today because the word that is translated as roof could also be translated as window. What is clear is that there were to be three decks and that the ark was to have a door in its side.

17 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.

The sense of this verse is that once the ark is finished, which is Noah's part; God will do His part, which is to bring the waters of the flood upon the earth. Here you once again have God being in control of the waters of the flood, there is no unleashing of any great monsters, just the water. The result of this will be a reversal of creation in that those creatures that were imbued with life-giving breath will have it taken from them through the disorder and the chaos of the flood. The order of the creation was put in place to sustain life and allow it to multiply. From this point forward the parameters of creation would be changed significantly.

18 But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.

In this verse the first usage of the Hebrew term *berith* (בְּרִית) occurs. This is one of the cardinal and pervasive themes in biblical literature. The term is employed in conjunction with the relationship that God will establish between Noah and Himself. In the present context it is unclear whether the verb (קוּם) indicates the fashioning of a new covenant or is indicative of God's affirmation of fulfilling one that has already been made. Outside of the context here, the other biblical usages of this word favor the fulfilling of a covenant that has previously been made. If that is the case here, we were not given the account of when this covenant was initially made except perhaps when we go back to 1:28.¹⁷ The idea would be that this blessing was going to be fulfilled through the line of Noah.¹⁸

¹⁷ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." NRSV

¹⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 53.

However, since the term for covenant is not used in conjunction with this promise made to Adam it may be that a new, unconditional guarantee is being given to Noah. A third possibility is that the usage here anticipates the covenant that God will make with Noah after the flood.¹⁹

¹⁹ 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.

The animals are to be saved through the ark.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.”

The ark is to be the matrix for a world that will be regenerated and as such it is to contain all the elements

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 53.

necessary for this new world.²⁰ The care and concern taken by God not to wipe out all those creatures that originally were created and described as “good” should be noted. This care and concern indicates something about the nature of God, His care and concern, but it also indicates that what He has created is not without hope of something better and is still worth saving. The “everything that is eaten” here would mean a herbivorous diet.

²² Noah did all this; he did all that God commanded him.

Noah was obedient to God in all of these things and the unquestioning obedience of Noah is emphasized here. This is a crucial element in the salvation history of humanity. There are all kinds of questions that might have been asked here, but the most important relates to this element of obedience. Without obedience would Noah have been saved? I think the answer must be no, he would have drowned and with him all the animals too.

²⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 53.

The building of this ark and the placing of the animals in the ark makes more sense too if there is no safe ground for them to escape to after the flood. This lends an additional element of support to the probability that the text here envisions a universal flood and not some sort of localized event. This account will serve as a foundational event for many things that will follow including salvation, covenants and the consequences of disobedience to God.

Synopsis

This section introduces the concept of righteousness. Here a clear distinction is drawn between those that are to be destroyed and those that are saved based upon this concept. It appears that God held the expectation that as creator mankind should observe certain standards of behavior. Though the text does not state these standards there is inherent in the fact that humankind is created in the “image of God” an understanding that this means there are certain responsibilities. The relationship of creator to creation also carries the implicit idea that what is created should fulfill the function for which it was created. Failure to observe

these standards will lead to destruction for all who fail, unless God intercedes in some manner.

This section also appears to introduce the idea that evil has a contaminating affect that can only be removed by some form of recreative cleansing, such as a new creation. The animals and then the earth itself have been contaminated by the sin of humankind and now they too fall under the judgment of God that they are unfit for their created purpose.

God supplies instructions to Noah that will bring salvation to him, his family, and the animals. Though God is the source of this salvation message, obedience is required on the part of Noah in order for it to be effective. Obedience is a necessary element in the salvation of Noah's family, the animals and the earth. God does not just supply Noah with a ready-made ark and place him and the animals inside nor does He choose some other methodology. He chooses a way in which obedience is a necessary element.

Main Points

1. The concept of righteousness is introduced here.
2. The concept of the contaminating nature of sin is highlighted.
3. God is the source of salvation that requires obedience in order to be effective.