

Genesis 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 8 But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.

The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed. The rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters had abated, and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month. In the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen. At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made, and sent forth a raven.

It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand, and took her, and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf.

[1 : 22] So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him any more. In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth.

And Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out.

Then God said to Noah, Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons, and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh, birds and animals, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.

So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife, and his sons' wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took some of every clean animal, and some of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, I will never again curse the ground because of man.

[2 : 37] For the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

In Genesis chapter 8 verse 1, we see the verse that is the turning point of the flood narrative. God remembers Noah. Later on, we'll see God remembering Abraham in the destruction of Sodom. We'll see God remembering Israel as he delivers them in the Exodus. Here, the wind blowing over the earth might recall the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2. It also maybe anticipates the strong east wind that blows over the Red Sea, opening a path for the Israelites to cross in the Exodus. The description of the receding sea is also similar to that used in reference to the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 14.

The chronology of the flood is important. As I've already noted, the length of days recorded are noteworthy. There are a number of periods of a week mentioned.

[3 : 46] There are a couple of 40-day periods. And 150 days is five months. You can think of this in a more schematised understanding of months, where each month is allocated 30 days.

We have different calendars for different things. There are some calendars that have exactly 52 weeks in the year. So you have a 4-4-5 pattern, four quarters of 13 weeks, divided into two four-week months and one five-week month.

When we're dealing with the flood narrative, I think it's important to recognise that we are dealing with something that seems highly schematised. There is a very close attention to the structure of the text.

We've already seen this chiasmic structure, this there and back again structure. We've also seen specific dates singled out. And those dates, it seems to me, are not just dates of occurrences, but they're dates that are correlated with certain observances.

The importance being that people read the story of the flood and recognise a meaning within it. So there are events that occur on the first day of the 601st year of Noah's life.

[4 : 58] That day is a significant one, not merely in terms of what occurred on it, but in terms of observance. It's correlated with a particular part of the calendar.

It seems likely to me that some of the peculiar details of the text can be explained in part by the bringing together of a lunar calendar with 354 days in the year and a solar calendar with 365 days in the year.

And within the text, we're seeing both of these having a play, along with the schematised month of 30 days, which is why you have the 150 day period being significant, five months.

The 150 is also associated with the age of Noah himself at the beginning of the flood, four times 150. The ark is also twice 150 in its length, which suggests maybe more is going on there.

The ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat, not necessarily Ararat itself, but rest is a play on Noah's name, that Noah is the one who was named in order that he would bring rest and relief and comfort to people after the cursing of the earth.

[6 : 10] And now he brings the ark to rest. He sends out the raven, and the raven's an unclean bird, but that's followed by a dove, which is a clean bird and may represent Noah himself.

The dove finds no resting place, and again, this is a play on Noah's name. The dove may be looking for a Noah, as it were, outside of the ark, but finds none. Note that Noah follows a weekly pattern in sending out the dove.

The dove comes back with an olive leaf, perhaps representing Israel in the end, and Noah reaches out his hand and takes the dove into the ark.

The last time we've seen that sort of language is in reference to the fear that man will reach out his hand and take of the tree of life. Is there some connection to be seen in the fact that Noah is reaching out his hand and taking this bird with this part of a tree?

Maybe there is something there. It's worth looking into, at least. The waters recede on the first day of the 601st year of Noah's life, and the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first year of the Exodus.

[7 : 18] And I've already noted a number of the different details that connect these stories. Israel goes out with 600,000 people. Noah begins the story of the ark in his 600th year, and so maybe there are further connections there.

Noah removes the covering from the ark, and the same language, again, is used for the covering of the tabernacle. Noah is in many ways a new Moses. He's the one that goes to the top of the mountain.

He's the one who's lifted up in an ark. Moses is placed in an ark in his infancy. He's the one who acts as a mediator for the people, and Noah acts as a mediator for humanity.

Noah constructs the ark. Moses constructs the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, which, as we have seen, have all sorts of parallels with the ark. And so it seems to me that we can fruitfully read these stories alongside each other.

And the festal illusions that we find within the story of Noah and the flood may be helpful here. There's a new creation situation.

[8 : 25] Animals are sent out to be fruitful and multiply in the earth. There's a first reference to an altar. Noah sacrifices clean animals upon the altar. Already we're having an anticipation of the sort of sacrifice that will be exercised later on.

Maybe the animals are supposed to represent human beings, so you have domestic animals representing human beings in an appropriate way that wild animals and beasts of the field cannot.

It seems to serve as a propitiating sacrifice. And maybe there's something important here to be considered concerning the logic of sacrifice more generally. And God's statement, where he almost repeats the assessment of humanity, but yet declares his desire for mercy, is an interesting one. It may remind you of the way that God speaks concerning the children of Israel and the hardness of their heart, but yet expressing a certain mercy even in his judgment at that point. And so, as I've noted, Noah is a Moses-like figure and a mediator.

One question for reflection. As we're reading through the story of the flood, there are a great many parallels with the story of the original creation. There's the wind of God upon the waters, just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters in Genesis chapter 1.

[9 : 43] There's the deep that covers the whole face of the earth. There's all the animals being gathered together and then being sent out to be fruitful and multiply. There's the emergence of the dry land from the waters and the separation of the two.

And then there's this celebration of a sort of Sabbath-like event as God blesses and shows mercy towards his creation. While the original creation narrative spanned the period of a week, in the Ark narrative, we're covering a whole year.

And there are patterns playing out here as well. Seasons and particular festal days and other things. That even in the chaos of the Ark, that's surrounded by waters, there are certain patterns that are emerging, that this seed is maintaining.

And then later on, God's promise that he will not judge the earth in the same manner again, but that the cycles of the year and the seasons will be maintained. So what I want you to think about are some of these parallels and how they can help us to read the greater significance of the story of the Ark against the background of the story of creation and the story of creation against the background of the story of the flood.