

-8-

encountering mythology: a case study from the flood narratives 2008

Believers today are facing a dilemma. Your average evangelical Christian is bombarded with information and perspectives, which a short ten years ago were not necessarily present in significant numbers in the religious world.¹ With the continuing expansion of the Internet, cable television, and even printed media, Christians are having to consider points of view regarding well-cherished accounts in the Tanach or Old Testament which they have never really had to consider before. While parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mythology have always been discussed in academic circles, or have been considered by that reference book collecting dust that one never reads, your average layperson is now having to consider these things by simply watching the History Channel or picking up a magazine at Barnes & Noble.² The answer to us as people of faith cannot be to hide ourselves under the proverbial bushel,³ act as though the enemy has simply perverted God's "Truth" with a capital T, and be isolated from any criticism of our faith. On the contrary, the Apostle Paul says to "test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We are required to engage with arguments that (may) attempt to rip apart the Bible's message for our lives, and consider them with a discernment that will hopefully enable us to be more effective in the Lord's service. The evangelical world is **now** having to deal with issues that have remained closed to the world of scholasticism—which means that the Messianic community is **not that far behind**.

One of the most important Tanach narratives that deserves the attention of today's Believers—particularly as it is employed later in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament⁴—is the Flood of Genesis 6-8. Just after God made His Creation, Adam and Eve fall into sin, and the Book of Genesis depicts "that [eventually] every imagination of the thoughts of his [man's] heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).⁵ The Lord has to send a devastating flood to wipe out what He had made (Genesis 6:7), save Noah who "found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). We all know the story too well—as only Noah, his family, and two of every

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

² Or worse yet, by going to an ever-changing and grossly unreliable source like Wikipedia!

³ Cf. Matthew 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33.

⁴ Matthew 24:37f; Luke 3:36; 17:26f; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5.

⁵ How long or how quickly this took place in actual time can only be a matter of chronological speculation, hence I have placed "eventually" in brackets.

animal were spared. But what many do not know is that there are other Ancient Near Eastern accounts *which portray a significant flood*, somehow inflicting damage on the world—that may or may not parallel what we see in Genesis. What we are to do with these accounts, the role that they play in relationship to Genesis 6-8, and what they mean have baffled many interpreters. Some believe that the ANE myths appeared first, and were later adapted by the Ancient Hebrews in the compilation of the Torah. Others believe that the ANE myths are distorted forms of the true Biblical account. And others, not surprisingly, are confused and do not know what to believe, avoiding the subject altogether.

Evangelical scholarship is just now having to catch up in its engagement with ANE mythology and the Bible, and no person needs to be uninformed or ignorant any more. This is especially true of a Messianic movement that claims our Heavenly Father is in the process of restoring the Torah to His people, yet is often ignorant of arguments against its trustworthiness that have been around since the mid-Nineteenth Century.

What is the debate over the Flood?

It can come as quite a shock to some of your average Bible readers to encounter a statement like, “The Biblical account is superficially similar to the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic.”⁶ Most people do not know what to do about this suggestion, and having to answer possible questions that come forth from it is a significant reason why many Christian pastors have been reluctant to teach on the (early) Old Testament. If not addressed appropriately by a pastor or Bible teacher, it can shake the faith of the naïve. It is not proper for today’s Body of Messiah to avoid a significant part of the Bible because leaders are unprepared, or even unable—or worse yet unwilling—to answer the difficult questions of those they must serve. We must be engaged with the discussion! The Messianic movement has emerged because people want to engage with the Torah and Tanach, but even we (at least on the whole) are significantly unprepared today to dialogue with the arguments levied against these Scriptures.

Biblical scholars over the past century (both Christian *and* Jewish) have long recognized some kind of connection between the Flood of Genesis 6-8 and the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh Epics, the two pieces of ANE mythology most widely considered. Atrahasis “contains an account of the creation of humankind and the flood,”⁷ whereas Gilgamesh just concerns a flood. How much of a connection there is between these stories and the Biblical account, however, can be debated.

Many will simply claim that Atrahasis, Gilgamesh, and any other ANE accounts are distortions (or even perversions) of the (true) Flood story seen in Scripture. Others, such as John Goldingay, will assert that there are important connections between these not just in Genesis but elsewhere: “In *Atrahasis*, the noise humanity makes disturbs the gods and provokes their wrath. In Exodus it provokes God’s intervention on their behalf.”⁸ Still, a third way of looking at this may be proposed by Umberto Cassuto in his defense of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. He says, “before the Torah was written, numerous traditions relating to the beginning of the world’s history and the earliest generations” “were undoubtedly current among the Israelites,” referring to a Rabbinic view that the Ancient Israelites possessed scrolls

⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, “Genesis,” in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, RSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 8.

⁷ J.H. Walton, “Flood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 315.

⁸ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 301.

of historical information while in Egypt.⁹ From his point of view, this data had to be sifted through and considered when the Torah was being composed.

While complicated arguments will be put forward by both liberals and conservatives, the “Which came first...” question simply lacks its following clause: “the chicken or the egg?” It seems clear enough that the information for the Flood account, whether seen in the Biblical tradition or in ANE mythology, certainly dates from sometime during the Second or Third Millenniums B.C.E. Both what we see in Genesis 6-8, as well as in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, portray people being killed by a flood of water. Yet the real question is not which came first, but *which conveys the unique message?* **Which of the dueling stories has “the edge”?** It is only when an interpreter can see the differences between these accounts, that he or she can decide which is more authentic. If today’s pastor or Bible teacher can understand how to focus the layperson on the differing messages of the Scriptural account versus the ANE accounts, then this should be able to *strengthen the faith* of others, rather than getting people to doubt God’s Word. The purpose of what a good pastor or teacher does is to get those he or she cares for to know “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NRSV).

What does Genesis 6-8 say?

Many people who are confused by the debate between the Bible and ANE mythology are sadly not that familiar with what the Scriptural account actually communicates. And, this can be then compounded by pastors whose teachings and sermons are so focused on the New Testament that they may not have read Genesis for a long time. Getting a big picture view of the Flood narrative of Genesis 6-8 is imperative, so we can then compare and contrast its message to any paralleling stories.

The narrative begins by describing the corruption brought by a group known as the Nephilim (נַפְלִיִּים, Genesis 6:1-4). While there is endless debate over who these were, ranging from powerful men to fallen angels, the point of the text is that “The LORD saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5, NJPS). Seeing that *kol-yetzer machshevot l’bo raq ra* (כָּל יֵצֵר מַחֲשֵׁבֶת לְבוֹ רָק רַע), “all purpose (of) thoughts his heart only evil” (my translation), “the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:6). What He had previously decreed as *tov meod* (טוֹב מְאֹד) or “very good” (Genesis 1:31), had now been utterly corrupted by sin, and so God says “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground” (Genesis 6:7a). For whatever reason, God’s judgment would also be severe enough to involve not only humans, but also “beast and creeping things and birds of the air” (Genesis 6:7b), which presumably had, or at least could have been corrupted, by human evil as well. But not all would be judged, as “Noah found grace¹⁰ in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:9, KJV).

It is from this point that Noah is instructed why he must build the ark that will contain the survivors from the coming catastrophe: “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence [lawlessness, NJPS]” (Genesis 6:11). God gives him the specifications and dimensions that He wants this ark to be (Genesis 6:14-16) and how animals were to be collected (Genesis 6:19-21). The main reason that Noah, and by extension his family, is preserved, is *ki-otkha ra’iti tzadik l’fnei* (כִּי־רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק לְפָנַי): “because you are righteous before me” (Genesis 7:1). The narrative then details how great rains would come for seven days (Genesis 7:4, 11-23), and how Noah obeyed the instructions given to him (Genesis 7:5) being the only survivor

⁹ Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2006), pp 121, 122.

¹⁰ Heb. *chen* (חֵן); Grk. LXX *charis* (χάρις).

(Genesis 7:23b). After a period of time, the rains stopped and the floodwaters receded enough for the ark Noah had built to come to rest “upon the mountains of Ararat” (Genesis 8:4). The judgment of wiping out the corruption had been completed, and Noah and his family are given the task of repopulating what God had destroyed (Genesis 8:13-19). Noah thanks God for His faithfulness toward him by building an altar and offering sacrifices (Genesis 8:20-21).

This is by no means a detailed summary of the Genesis Flood account, but what it does is beg the question of *why* God had to send it. Many when first reading Genesis 6-8 try to immediately ask the questions of *how* the Flood took place, attempting to find the empirical evidence that it occurred, tallying how many animal species were actually on the Ark, or even trying to find where Noah’s Ark itself may be in modern-day Turkey. Sadly, the most significant engagement many have had with this issue has been with a felt-board and stuffed animals in Sunday school, and many are unable to understand what Noah’s Flood actually teaches us. The narrative of the Noadic Flood in Genesis is not about some teddy bear story, nor is it to give any of us a geology lesson. The Flood account of Genesis is to present us with the first **theology of judgment** that we see in Scripture.

Conservatives are divided whether the Flood of Genesis 6-8 was a worldwide flood, or a regional flood—but such debates should *only* be considered after the actual questions that the text asks are answered. Genesis 6:17 says that God sent the Flood *al-ha’eretz* (עַל־הָאָרֶץ) or “upon the earth/land,” and *kol-basar asher-bo ruach chayim mi’tachat ha’shamayim* (רוּחַ הַיָּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם) (כָּל־בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ), “all flesh that in it (has) breath (of) life from under the heavens” (my translation). What this might mean is open to diverse views, considering the fact that later, when Joseph is serving the Egyptian Pharaoh in Genesis 41:56, a famine struck *al kol-pnei ha’eretz* (עַל כָּל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ) or “all the face of the earth” (NASU), which the text clearly indicates to be regional to the Ancient Near East. When we consider this, certainly from the perspective of those who participated in the Flood of Genesis 6-8, it was “worldwide” encompassing the world that they knew. The stress point of the Apostle Peter is that in the Flood it was eight human beings saved from a disaster that affected all of humanity (1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5).¹¹

Walter C. Kaiser is right to conclude, “The point is that Scripture is anxious only to teach that it was God’s judgment on all mortals living on earth except the eight on the ark. On the other matters we must await more information.”¹² As it is said very clearly from the outset: “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth” (Genesis 6:5, NRSV), and “the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth” (Genesis 6:6, NJPS), with the verb *nacham* (נָחַם) possibly meaning “to become remorseful” (Nifal, HALOT).¹³ There is *no indication* anywhere in Genesis 6-8 that *God wanted* to send the Flood. Yet, because Noah is designated as the only person with any righteousness, He had no choice but to do it. Genesis 6:6 candidly says “He was grieved in His heart” (NASU). John H. Sailhamer reminds us,

“By making God the subject of the verbs in v.6, the author has shown that the grief and pain of man’s sin was not something that only man felt. God himself was grieved over man’s sin (v.7).”¹⁴

Indeed, each of us should be reminded that the Flood sent by God in Genesis 6-8 was ultimately humanity’s own doing. While God is the agent of judgment, it was people falling

¹¹ For a further examination of this debate, consult Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), pp 139-172.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, Manfred T. Branch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), pp 113-114.

¹³ HALOT, 1:688.

¹⁴ John C. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:81.

into perverse activities that required Him to judge. This is why 2 Peter 2:5 can assert, “he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly.”¹⁵

What does the Epic of Gilgamesh say?

The tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh were discovered by British archaeologist A.H. Laynard between 1845-1851 in an excavation around the city of Nineveh, being sent to the British Museum for examination. George Smith produced a translation of these tablets in 1872, and published them in a report called the “Chaldean Account of the Deluge.” Archaeologists often date the composition of the Epic of Gilgamesh anywhere from between 2000-1800 B.C.E.¹⁶ This pre-dates the composition of the Pentateuch (if one accepts any kind of Mosaic authorship) by at least 300 years, presumably making these traditions present during the lifetime of Abraham. Many advocates of the JEDP documentary hypothesis¹⁷ have considered the Mesopotamian stories to possibly be the sources behind our canonical account seen in Genesis 6-8.

While the overall story of the protagonist is portrayed as a warrior on a journey, the flood narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh is what clearly stands out to anyone who reads it with a cursory knowledge of the Bible. This narrative opens with the gods complaining that the uproar of humankind is too loud for them to sleep: “‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind.”¹⁸ The protagonist in the story is warned in a dream by the god Ea to build a bark from his house, which will be sure to save him in the midst of the disaster that is coming. Specifically, he is told “take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.”¹⁹ The boat is then built, and the protagonist along with family and close friends load up themselves along with a great number of livestock. A great torrent of water is then unleashed from the gods: “Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the Annunaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup.”²⁰

The consequences of this flood are actually interesting to read. It is said, “Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs.”²¹ The goddess Ishtar, in fact, relents over the decision to destroy humanity: “Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.”²² Such a dilemma is shared by the other gods: “The great gods of heaven and hell wept, they covered their mouths.”²³ Having acted on a whim, the gods are now distraught at what they had done.

¹⁵ Grk. *kosmō asebōn* (κόσμος ἄσεβων); the emphasis seen in the genitive *asebōn* is “the world of ungodly people” (NLT).

¹⁶ Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp 9-10.

¹⁷ For a review, consult the entries for the Pentateuchal books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) in the author’s workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁸ Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Areas of agreement and disagreement

Without going any further, an objective person can see some parallels between the Biblical Flood in Genesis 6-8, and this Mesopotamian account. Both involve the intention to eliminate humans via water. Both involve some kind of large boat on which the protagonist will place his family, animals, and supplies. Both involve widescale death and ecological devastation. And, both involve some kind of regret by the deity/deities afterwards. Gordon J. Wenham indicates, “there are remarkable similarities between the Mesopotamian and biblical accounts of the flood, so close in some cases that it has been alleged that the biblical tale is based on the Mesopotamian.”²⁴ And, a lay interpreter with no more information, or a pastor who is unfamiliar with this and can not answer direct questions, could now possibly decide that his or her Bible is based on repackaged ANE mythology and is thus untrustworthy.

It is actually not in the areas of building some kind of boat, collecting animals, or large torrents of water that sets apart Genesis 6-8 from the Epic of Gilgamesh. The reason that the Genesis 6-8 account is unique is found in the *why* of the Flood. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, we specifically see that the reason the gods devastate the world is because it has gotten too loud and boisterous for them to sleep. “[T]he original intention of the gods was to decimate the numbers of humankind so as to reduce the noise level (whatever the noise represents). When those strategies fail to produce the desired result, the flood is sent to destroy humanity completely.”²⁵ The gods are portrayed as being those who act exactly like the impulsive human beings that are annoying them, and without thought they make a decision to wipe them all out to silence a distraction. The flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh is sent to wipe out an infestation, no different than how an anthill or a basement infested by rats would be visited by an exterminator. Wenham asserts that there is a “monotheistic moralism [in Genesis] that informs the biblical narrative over against the caprice, self-interest, and weakness of the Mesopotamian gods and goddesses.”²⁶ In Genesis, the Lord is clearly in control of His faculties.

The reason for the Biblical Flood is clearly stated as being the constant evil of human beings (Genesis 6:5), and God does not by any means act as though He wants to judge them (Genesis 6:6). Genesis 6:11 is quite specific: *timalei ha'aretz chamas* (תַּמְלֵי אֶרֶץ חָמָס), with Nahum M. Sarna remarking, “From the divine enactments for the regulation of society after the Flood, detailed in chapter 9, it may be deduced that *hamas* [חָמָס] here refers predominantly to the arrogant disregard for the sanctity and inviolability of human life.”²⁷ The problem that God has with humanity is not that it is noisy or loud; the problem is that it has gotten out of control and is engulfed in gross evil, with people likely showing great harm toward one another (cf. Genesis 9:6). God’s very nature as a perfect, everlasting, and just Creator demands that He do something about sin when it is present in His world. God’s “flood is portrayed as an act of justice”²⁸ that is well-deserved for the offenders—toward whom He has been rather forbearing—rather than as the indiscriminate act of rashness as displayed by the Mesopotamian gods. The God who sends the Flood in Genesis sends it with a distinct purpose, ultimately to save those few of humanity who are still loyal and faithful to Him. The gods and goddesses of Mesopotamia just want to sleep, yet the Lord is One who “will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4).

²⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in ECB, 43.

²⁵ Walton, “Flood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 319.

²⁶ Wenham, in ECB, 43.

²⁷ Sarna, *Genesis*, 51.

²⁸ Walton, “Flood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 319.

encountering mythology: a case study from the flood narratives

To place this all in proper balance, though, while the God of the Genesis Flood acts differently than the gods and goddesses of Gilgamesh, not being impulsive, that is not to say that He is *completely* different from His human creatures. Goldingay validly reminds us, “The First Testament’s understanding of God distances itself in some ways from that of other Middle Eastern peoples, yet it resists the temptation to ricochet too far from the later. We are persons like God, and therefore God can be portrayed as a person like us.”²⁹ However, when the gods and goddesses unleash the torrents of water in Gilgamesh, they are severely frightened at what they have done, perhaps thinking that even they (as immortal beings!) will be engulfed by the water. In Genesis, God as Creator demonstrates no such fear over the water, as He entirely controls it for His distinct purpose. Yet, when the incident is over, He is sure to promise Noah, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11).

How is Genesis 6-8 unique?

It is undeniable that one of the reasons why many of today’s pastors and Bible teachers do not want to teach about the Flood of Genesis 6-8 is precisely because it is a scene that invokes a great deal of negative imagery. We are not specifically told all of the kinds of sins that were committed to provoke the Flood; we are only told that the Flood was sent to stop it. When a person’s engagement with the Flood has been colored by early childhood activities from Sunday school, it can be difficult to see the *whys* of the Flood, especially when issues like judgment or punishment of sin are never popular sermon topics. Yet, it is clear that Genesis 6-8 teaches us some important things about the character of God, the value that He places on the righteous, and the decisive nature of His judgment versus other gods who are portrayed as irrational. Who do we consider God to be? A ravaging maniac who wants to snuff out His creatures as a cosmic “Orkin man”? Or, one who cannot allow those who are truly loyal to Him to endure the hardship of having to be surrounded by evil?

The Flood and the Apostolic Scriptures

The Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) regard the themes communicated by the Flood to be very serious, as it certainly does not shy away from considering the justice of God enacted upon evil. Yeshua describes the period before the Flood to be similar to the time before His return, saying “They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:27). Here, the emphasis of the Flood is not placed on any kind of geology or how large the Flood was, but instead only on the people who were judged. In a similar way, those who go on with their daily lives without any concern for the justice of God, will likewise be caught unaware and consumed at the Second Coming. As our Lord says, “For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah” (Matthew 24:37, NASU). While Yeshua could be reflecting on some opinions of the days before the Flood contemporary to the First Century, the analogy is one that need not be ignored: God’s judgment will come suddenly to the unrighteous.

The Apostle Peter reflects on the importance of the Flood, asserting that “God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water” (1 Peter 3:20). This *makrothumia* (μακροθυμία) or “longsuffering” (KJV) is not given any length of time—that is, between humanity’s gross evil and God’s intention to judge it—but in comparison to how long the Mesopotamian gods and

²⁹ Goldingay, 176.

confronting critical issues

goddesses waited to wipe out humanity, the character of the Lord should definitely stand out. While nothing is stated in Genesis to this effect, Noah is somehow considered to be “a herald of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). It may be doubtful that he was a “preacher” (NASU)³⁰ in the contemporary definition of the term, but his proper behavior certainly made him different than his neighbors, thus being a model for us to emulate.

The author of Hebrews also considers Noah to be a very important figure, telling us “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith” (Hebrews 11:17). He considers Noah’s act of obedience to God’s instruction to build the ark to actually be an act of faith, presumably connecting it to Noah being a man found righteous by Him (Genesis 6:9). Noah was told by God about the Flood that was coming, yet he probably did not understand what it was all about, nor how it was going to come about. (And ironically enough, people who read Genesis are still hard-pressed to decide how it came about.)

As Believers, the Flood of Genesis 6-8 not only forms an important part of the primeval Biblical history, but it also tells us important things about the worldview of Yeshua the Messiah and His early followers. While it is certainly important to read the Flood narrative, and ask appropriate questions concerning why God sent the Flood and how the Genesis account differs from others seen in the ANE, it is also important for every Believer to know how the Genesis Flood is appropriated in the Apostolic Scriptures. From what we can see, it adds further dimensions for us understanding God’s forbearance in judging sin, how such judgment will come unaware for those who are not alert, and also how Noah can be a definitive example of faith for us to follow. In a world (or even community of faith) that has largely forgotten the reality of sin—the Genesis 6-8 Flood is not something that pastors and Bible teachers should shy away from! If we want people to actually turn toward the Lord in repentance, the themes of Genesis 6-8 should form an integral part of the overall gospel experience.

How do we approach issues like this in the future?

Avoiding the issue of the Genesis Flood, and not answering some of the (difficult) questions posed by people today, will not bode well for the Christian pastor who wants to make a difference for the Lord. It will certainly not bode well for the Messianic congregational leader whose teachings are primarily focused on the weekly Torah portion, yet who is unwilling to consider the Pentateuch against the world in which its events occurred. We need to be men and women—whether clergy or laity—who are informed about the similarities and differences of ANE mythology and the Scriptural record. When we do this, we often find that the Bible **has a significantly different message** than the competing accounts. Scripture often has a very targeted message that will teach us important things about the character of God, so when compared to the ancient gods or goddesses, reveal Him to be One who we can indeed trust.

The comparison between mythology and the Bible neither begins nor ends with the Genesis Flood; the Flood just happens to be one that a person may easily encounter. When we can adequately address all of the theological reasons surrounding something like the Flood, questions of where the story originated in history will inevitably arise. How we treat the Flood story with some level of integrity is certainly important for us to consider. If we believe that the Bible has some degree of reliability, and that supernatural events really do take place, then

³⁰ Grk. *kērux* (κῆρυξ).

encountering mythology: a case study from the flood narratives

there are surely some logical and reasonable answers to how the Flood took place in the history of Planet Earth. But when we do investigate these things, the message of the Flood for us should remain paramount.

Should one choose to completely abandon that the Flood of Genesis took place—whether global, regional, or otherwise—and consider it to be repackaged mythology, what other accounts in Scripture could be repackaged mythology? How far does a responsible Bible teacher, minister, or even Messianic rabbi take this? Is it at all possible that five centuries before the birth of the Messiah that the Greek playwright Aeschylus set the stage for the Gospels, by formulating his production of *Prometheus Bound*, a play that speaks of a god bringing fire to humanity and then being chained to a rock by Zeus as punishment?³¹ Prometheus later and dramatically arises, being vindicated and standing as the champion for the mortals he tried to help.³² How far we go with connections between mythology and the Bible can be a slippery slope if we are not careful, and it surely will involve the spiritual discernment and tact of our leaders and teachers in the future. Simply because one may have been presented with a simplistic, somewhat fundamental view of the Genesis Flood as an adolescent, should give no one a license to then blatantly disregard it all as repackaged and deceptive mythology in later life. For how are we to be consistent with this standard throughout the rest of the Bible? Do we later deny Yeshua the Messiah as the Savior of the world?³³ We have to be very careful, as the most strident liberal theologians often never started out as being liberal at all. Instead, they started out as those who blindly accepted the Bible's message, but were then led astray when hearing criticism against it.

Challenges do await today's generation of Christian leaders that were not as pressing as they were for leaders of the past—and *further and more complex challenges* await leaders and teachers in the emerging Messianic movement. Whereas in the past, differing views of the Genesis Flood were perhaps relegated to theological books that no one read, today with the easy access of information things have significantly changed. No longer can pastors or teachers wait until the last minute to write their sermons (much less first encountering the Biblical text when getting up to speak in the pulpit). No more can any teacher leading a Bible study afford to remain uninformed. Each of us must be on top of our game, and be able to answer as many questions as possible.

Those of us who are called as teachers must each learn what Ezra learned: "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the LORD so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel" (Ezra 7:10, NJPS). We need not avoid controversial issues in the Tanach such as the Flood any longer, but learn to emphasize, as Sarna does, "the Flood story of the Torah stands out as an authentic, original expression of the religious genius of Israel. Conceptually, spiritually, and morally, it stands in striking contrast to all other versions."³⁴ The Flood of Genesis 6-8 is supposed to instruct all Believers in the importance of righteousness—now even more important that Yeshua has come—and God's targeted judgment of those who are unfaithful. We have much to learn from God's revelation to us in the Tanach, and it may often hold the missing keys to us understanding *the Messiah's message* to us in a fuller and more meaningful way.

³¹ *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, pp 20-21.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

³³ For a further discussion, consult Chapter 7, "Is the Story of Yeshua Pagan?"

³⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 49.