

# **The Genesis Flood: A Critique of Violence**

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- I. Introduction
- II. Historical Context
- III. Story Language and Anthropomorphisms
  - A. When God Repents
  - B. When God Grieves
  - C. When God Appropriates Violence
- IV. A Counter-narrative to Violence
  - A. When God Remembers
  - B. When God Disarms
- V. Application
- VI. Conclusion

## I. Introduction

The story of Noah's ark has always been a favorite for children's ministry, yet beneath the images of docile beasts walking two by two, there runs a current of violence unparalleled in the Old Testament. "Rarely today are we shown images of those children who did not happen to be members of Noah's family and are swept away in the deluge, never to be heard from again."<sup>1</sup> How could God, as revealed by Jesus Christ, purposefully destroy all of mankind? It is undeniable that when taken as a literal, historical event, the flood story implicates God in enormous violence against his creation. However, upon examination of the historical context and literary genre—particularly the numerous anthropomorphisms within the text—it is evident that within the flood story, there is a subversive counter-narrative that criticizes violence rather than endorses it.

There is substantial geological and scientific evidence that a worldwide flood such as described in Genesis was not a historical event. While this is comforting news for those who are troubled by the violence of the story, it does not render the flood narrative as "theologically useless."<sup>2</sup> It is a part of scripture, therefore it has something to teach the reader. As the Archbishop Lazar Puhalo says of the stories within the Old Testament, they show the reader "How mankind transfers his own passions, his own cruelties and his own aggressiveness onto his understanding of God."<sup>3</sup> In order to see this subtle criticism beneath the dominant narrative, it is necessary to step into the story-world of the text.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, *The Mirror of Scripture: The Old Testament is About You* (Abbotsford: St. Macrina Press, 2018), 28.

## II. Historical Context

The flood narrative was originally an oral tradition. It is filled with hyperbole and exaggeration, reading like a story told to children.<sup>4</sup> Phrases such as “violence covered the whole earth,” or “waters that went higher than the mountains” are not meant to be taken literally, but “rather they are important clues that we are dealing with a theological story rather than ancient journalism.”<sup>5</sup> According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “The skill of the narrator is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to carry the listening community to a new discernment about the character of the world and its locus in relation to God.”<sup>6</sup>

Those who take the Genesis account literally usually believe in a Mosaic authorship, though most contemporary scholars conclude Genesis is actually composed from several different sources, possibly from Israel’s northern and southern traditions. According to Brueggemann, “It is beyond dispute that this text conflates two strands of tradition, commonly designated J and P, or at least designated as Israel’s early and later theological traditions.”<sup>7</sup> J, or the “Yahwist” source is the oldest tradition and primarily recounts Israel’s origin stories. It is also characteristic of describing God in highly anthropomorphic language.<sup>8</sup> P, or the “priestly” source, edits the text to remind the exiled Israel of the covenant that began with Noah in Gen. 9:11. “Thus, a careful reading of Genesis offers

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> “How should we interpret the Genesis flood account?” Biologos, last modified December 16, 2019, <https://biologos.org/common-questions/how-should-we-interpret-the-genesis-flood-account/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Dianne Bergent, *Genesis: In the Beginning* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), xvii.

insights into how ancient Israel constructed its identity at different points.”<sup>9</sup> Another commentator writes, “Whether or not all these traditions were actual literary documents, and whatever their precise dating might have been, scholars agree that Genesis, or the entire Pentateuch for that matter, is a composite of different theological traditions woven together to create one coherent story.”<sup>10</sup>

To fully understand the meaning of the story, it is important to firmly situate it amongst the literature of its time. The biblical flood narrative was neither the only nor the first ancient flood myth. The ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures all formulated stories about catastrophic floods in which one man and his family escaped in a large boat.<sup>11</sup> These ancient cultures were not interested in recording what exactly happened during this disaster, but rather in explaining *why* it happened.<sup>12</sup> In one story, the gods sent a flood to punish humankind for being too noisy.<sup>13</sup> As scholar Daniel C. Harlow puts it, Israel’s reworking of other culture’s myths functions “in large measure as myths do: to explain humanity’s current condition and to articulate a particular conception of the world and of the divine-human relationship.”<sup>14</sup> The Genesis authors used a common Mesopotamian myth and reworked it, highlighting the ways in which their God was different from the other gods. While modern readers tend to focus chiefly on the violence of the flood, Walter Brueggemann suggests that “the focus of the flood story is not on the

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<sup>9</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, ed., *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (Philadelphia: CCAR Press, 2008), “Genesis,” n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Bergent, *Genesis*, xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Enns and Jared Byas, *Genesis for Normal People: A Guide to the Most Controversial, Misunderstood, and Abused Book of the Bible* (USA: The Bible for Normal People), loc. 922, Kindle.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, loc. 925.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, loc. 948.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel C. Harlow, “After Adam: Reading Genesis in an Age of Evolutionary Science,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62, no. 3, September 2010, 181.

flood but upon the change wrought in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation.”<sup>15</sup>

If both the geological and archeological record indicate that the flood as described in Genesis did not actually happen, it stands to reason that God did not orchestrate a worldwide slaughter of the wicked. Why then is the Genesis account of any more value than any other myth? “What we have in Genesis is not propositional revelation, but narrative theology. Like the parables of Jesus, though, the stories in early Genesis are no less divinely inspired for being stories.”<sup>16</sup> The Genesis account “is above all a book of theology, not an account of history.”<sup>17</sup> Its primary purpose is to reveal the character of God *and* serve as a mirror reflecting the human heart. It is most beneficial when the reader allows “these texts to give us insight into our own lives so we can honestly face the darkness and pain there, and find ways of breaking out of the deadly logic of justifying violence ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of using a literal interpretation to condone violence, the reader is called to bear witness to the story, and to find oneself in it.

### **III. Story Language and Anthropomorphisms**

“Anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms are figures of speech that transmit theological truths about God to humankind. Only when taken literally are they misconstrued. Taken as metaphorical expressions, they provide by analogy a conceptual

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<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Harlow, “After Adam,” 185.

<sup>17</sup> Bergent, *Genesis*, xix.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-picking Liberals, Violence-loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco: Metanoia Books, 2014), 106.

framework by which the God who is beyond our comprehension becomes a person—a person whom we can love.”<sup>19</sup>

The entire flood narrative, like the creation story, is full of these anthropomorphisms.<sup>20</sup>

God regrets, God grieves, God destroys, God remembers, God smells. These poignant images serve to highlight something specific about God’s character in the story. St.

Augustine implied that this was simply God condescending to make himself known to “the level of the lowliest readers.”<sup>21</sup> They are not meant to be taken literally—as even most conservative scholars would agree. However, that does not mean they are simply poetry that can be regarded as inessential to interpretation. As will be shown, these anthropomorphisms serve to subvert the dominant narrative of violence.

For those used to a strictly literal hermeneutic, this manner of engaging the text will seem unorthodox. And yet, Fretheim writes, “It is important to note that an inner-biblical warrant exists for the people of God to raise questions and challenges regarding God’s (anticipated) actions.”<sup>22</sup> An example of this is “Abraham’s challenge in Gen. 18:25, ‘Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?’”<sup>23</sup> Dr. Wilda C. Gafney refers to this form of midrash as “God-wrestling,” common to Jewish rabbis as well as the early Christian desert mothers and fathers.<sup>24</sup> The hesitancy to engage the text in this way comes from the

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<sup>19</sup> Keith N. Schoville, “Anthropomorphism,” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996),

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/anthropomorphism.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Bergent, *Genesis*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine of Hippo, Saint, *The City of God*, 15.25.

<sup>22</sup> Terence Fretheim, “God and Violence in the Old Testament,” *Word and World* 24, no. 1, (2004), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 5.

Enlightenment far more than it does from orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup> The anthropomorphisms in the text bid the reader to pay attention. The coming sections will address five of the most compelling anthropomorphisms in the flood narrative: When God repents, when God grieves, when God appropriates violence, when God remembers, and finally, when God disarms.

### A. When God Repents

*“And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth.”*<sup>26</sup> The King James version translates “sorry” as “repents.” Taken literally, this passage implies something contrary to the Christian doctrine of immutability; i.e., God can assess the situation and change his mind. “Far from being infallible and all-knowing, God confronts unexpected results and has a change of heart.”<sup>27</sup> This wording in Genesis causes uneasiness for some. 17th century commentator Matthew Henry wrote, “The expressions here used are very strange: *It repented the Lord that he had made man upon the earth...* These are expressions after the manner of men, and must be understood so as not to reflect upon the honour of God’s immutability or felicity.”<sup>28</sup>

The Genesis account phrases it this way not because God isn’t omniscient or immutable, but because this is an anthropomorphism in which the text invites the reader

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond a Modernist Impasse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 263.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 6:6 (NKJV).

<sup>27</sup> Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah*, n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible (Complete)*, Vol. 1, (1706), N.p., <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Gen.6.6-Gen.6.7>.

(or listener) “to penetrate into the heart of God.”<sup>29</sup> Yahweh had a specific design for his creation, but creation usurped that purpose. “The story is not concerned with historical data but with the strange things which happen in the heart of God that decisively affect God’s creation.”<sup>30</sup> God is so deeply disturbed by human violence, he regrets that he made man in the first place. It cannot be stressed enough how unique this portrayal of God was.

## **B. When God Grieves**

“... *and He was grieved in His heart.*”<sup>31</sup> The image of Yahweh grieving shows that he is *moved* by his creation and concerned about the actions of humanity. It is important to remember that the flood story cannot truly be understood out of the context of Genesis 1–4. The Yahweh in the flood narrative is the same one who stooped down and carefully fashioned Adam from dirt. Israel’s God sees the *chamas* (utter, encompassing evil)<sup>32</sup> of his creation and is *’asav* (pained) like a woman in labor,<sup>33</sup> intimately aware of the pain from the curse of Genesis 3:16. In the story, Yahweh has determined that the world must be destroyed but the primary motivator is not a response of anger, but grief!<sup>34</sup> Unlike the gods of ancient Babylon and Sumeria, he takes no delight in the destruction of the wicked. “What we go through by way of agony and suffering is not unknown to God. God, who created everything, chose to join the world’s suffering, undergo it, and know what it means from the inside.”<sup>35</sup> This is of course evidenced most clearly in the cross of Christ, but even

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<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Genesis 6:6b (NKJV).

<sup>32</sup> Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah*, n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “No One Had to Die for Our Sins,” *US Catholic* 83, no. 12, (December 2018), 28-32, <https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201811/no-one-had-die-our-sins-31563>.

here, in Israel's origin stories, one can catch a glimpse of a God who is anything but indifferent.

### C. When God Appropriates Violence

*“And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.”*<sup>36</sup> In the story world of the text, Yahweh takes on the human characteristics of grief and regret in order to teach that he is intimately involved with his creation, and has a plan and purpose for humankind. There is another anthropomorphism within the text; however, instead of teaching something about God, this one serves to teach something about humanity. Namely, *there is a human propensity to attribute mankind's most violent and disturbing inclinations onto God.*<sup>37</sup> Yahweh becomes the scapegoat for human violence, the justification for our incessant need to punish, dominate, and judge.

This propensity to attribute one's own violence onto God can be seen in the way nonviolent readings of the text are ignored in favor of more violent or judgemental ones. In a sermon on the flood story, conservative pastor John MacArthur said, “God literally drowned the billions of people that populated the earth, and they were catapulted into a godless eternity by His judgment. What God did in the past is essentially what He's going to do in the future. The only difference is the medium won't be water, it will be fire.”<sup>38</sup>

Tellingly, MacArthur ignores Genesis 8:21, in which God vows to never again destroy all of

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<sup>36</sup> Genesis 6:13 (NKJV).

<sup>37</sup> Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>38</sup> John MacArthur, “The Destruction of Mankind: Part One,” *Grace to You*, January 14, 2001, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-255/the-destruction-of-mankind-part-1>.

creation, in favor of Genesis 9:11, in which the promise not to destroy is tempered by the qualifying phrase “*by a flood.*” What is happening in these two verses? Was God feeling especially benevolent in chapter eight but rather cranky in chapter nine? Is it, as MacArthur would suggest, simply a clarification? If so, it’s certainly not very comforting. There is, however, another explanation for this discrepancy. In chapter eight, God promises not to destroy the earth again. In chapter nine, he reaffirms this and offers *additional* reassurance, as if God is saying, “I will never destroy the earth again—no, not even with a flood.” This begs the question, why is it so easy to read violence into a text when it’s completely unnecessary?

Once again it must be stated: this is a story. Though it may contain echoes of a historical event, it is not a literal, scientific account. This story, like any piece of good art, forces the reader to reassess preconceived notions about God *and* to confront society’s own violent tendencies. Picasso was a great artist, yet no reasonable person would conclude that his portraits are an accurate representation of people in the sixties. In the same way, we cannot afford to insist on a literal interpretation of what is obviously a literary technique. Is it not possible that the authors of Genesis have imposed onto God the *human belief* that only violence can solve violence? Could God, as revealed by Jesus, really destroy the earth’s entire population (except for one family)? It seems far more likely that this is another anthropomorphism, in which humans have attributed their own violent fantasies onto the divine.

It is clear that a literal interpretation misrepresents God. However, this does not mean the story should be discarded simply because it doesn’t function how modern,

Western minds assume it ought to behave. To do so would mean missing out on a lesson that the world desperately needs. Violence doesn't solve violence. History tells us it won't work for man, the story tells us it won't work for God.

#### **IV. A Counter-narrative to the Dominant Belief in Violence**

##### **A. When God Remembers**

*"Then God remembered Noah..."*<sup>39</sup> Yahweh sends a great wind (ruach), the same word used in Genesis 1:2 to describe God's spirit hovering over the waters.<sup>40</sup> According to Dianne Bergant, "The phrase 'God remembered' usually means more than simply 'calling to mind.' It includes the notion of intervening with appropriate action, usually with divine mercy."<sup>41</sup> The flood waters dry up, Noah and his family leave the ark, and Noah builds an altar. God smells the soothing sacrifice and makes a covenant with Noah. Like Brueggemann, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* observes that the covenant is based on God's willingness to change in spite of humankind's inclination to evil.<sup>42</sup> Yahweh imposes limits on human violence, "Whoever sheds man's blood by man shall his blood be shed," but imposes even greater limits on himself, vowing to never destroy the earth again.

##### **B. When God Disarms**

*"I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."*<sup>43</sup> The final anthropomorphism in this study comes from Gen. 9:13. While the story does invite the listener to envision a rainbow, there is a subtle play on words. "The

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<sup>39</sup> Genesis 8:1.

<sup>40</sup> Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah*, "The Flood," n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Bergant, *Genesis*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah*, "Transformation, Covenant, and Renewal," n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 9:13 (KJV).

bow is a weapon, God's bow of warfare. Displaying the bow in the sky after a rain means he is hanging it up; no more warfare against his creation."<sup>44</sup> In the story, God has fought violence with violence, and this tactic has failed. Yahweh recognizes that humankind will always have a bentness towards evil, not even total destruction will cure it. Instead, he determines to "find a new way to deal with the problem of sin and evil... That way is the way of suffering and death. And over time, God's suffering proves to be very powerful indeed."<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, the bow in the clouds serves as a reminder not to mankind, but to *God* that violence has failed. Why would God need a reminder? Is the rainbow some sort of cosmic post-it note just in case God forgets his promise and has a hankering to smite the planet again? Of course not. This is another example of God's kindness. Like a loving father who gets on his hands and knees to check for monsters under the bed, the rainbow is God's "All clear!" to his children in need of comfort. As God says in Isaiah, "Can a woman forget her nursing child?" Though any lactating mother will attest that this is a physical impossibility, God goes on, "Even if they do... I will not forget you."<sup>46</sup> Thus the rainbow is not only a sign of God's disarmament, it is his continual assurance that no matter how his children fail, he will not forget his covenant.

## V. Application

One of the strongest arguments of those who believe in a literal interpretation of the flood is that it demonstrates God's sovereign right to judge. Like a traditional belief in hell,

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<sup>44</sup> Enns and Byas, *Genesis for Normal People*, loc. 1036.

<sup>45</sup> Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Isaiah 49:15.

the flood story teaches that God takes sin seriously. God is not indifferent to the suffering of the innocent. The wicked will not prevail forever. As Terrence Fretheim put it, “Human anger at injustice will carry less weight and seriousness if divine anger at injustice in the service of life is not given its proper place. If our God is not angry, why should we be?”<sup>47</sup> To this view, I have profound sympathy. I also want an end to white supremacy, violence, and misogyny. However, even the “plainest” reading of the story challenges the assumption that violent judgement solves any of these issues.

In the flood story, antediluvians are simplistically portrayed as more Orc-like than human. Their every action, intention, and imagination is utterly irredeemable. But what about their children? Were they also deserving of divine judgement? Did Noah sit in safety, hearing their cries from outside the ark as the flood waters rose? The text does not tell us, precisely because *the reader is supposed to ask questions*. Judgement can only be justified when the enemy is dehumanized. In contrast to the rest of wicked humanity, Noah is portrayed as righteous—he alone finds grace in God’s sight. And yet, in the very next story, Noah planted a vineyard, got drunk, exposed himself to his son Ham, and cursed his grandson Canaan—all in a span of six verses. As Dianne Bergent puts it, “Sin went right into the ark along with at least one of the descendents of Noah.”<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, the innocent were destroyed with the wicked in the flood. Undoubtedly, the guilty were spared on the ark. Violence did not bring justice.

“If gods are idealizations of human beings and models for conduct, then the behavior of a society’s gods toward humans represents an important aspect of that

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<sup>47</sup> Terrence Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24 (2002), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Bergent, *Genesis*, 36.

culture's moral ideals for human interaction. God's morality is a model for human morality, motivating analogous violence."<sup>49</sup> In short, what we believe about how God treats the wicked will inevitably impact how we behave towards our enemies. To see this, one need only look at the way Christians have treated homosexuals or the way European settlers justified the genocide of Native Americans. If God's enemies are our enemies, it won't be long until our enemies are his.

In focusing on the flood as an example of God's right to judge humanity, we miss the point of the story. It cannot be said enough—*God tried violence, and it didn't work*. God divided his creation into "righteous" and "wicked" but a chasm between the two is really an illusion. Even if every man, woman, and child was as worthy of destruction as the text implies, were they any more deserving of death than others in history? Was their sin worse than the holocaust? Was it more heinous than the crucifixion? The cross of Calvary reveals that even during humankind's most heinous act, God was willing to absorb human violence rather than to return it. In that moment, Jesus chose neither fire nor flood, but forgiveness. As Derek Flood writes, "What if justice was not about punishing and hurting, but about mending and making things right again? ... What if real justice was about repairing broken lives?"<sup>50</sup> This is the essence of the Gospel, and this is what the flood story teaches. God turns away from violence and towards a covenant.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The flood narrative is a story that surpasses the categories of history and fiction, revealing more about the violent tendencies of human nature than it does about God's.

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<sup>49</sup> Fiske and Rai, *Virtuous Violence*, 51-52.

<sup>50</sup> Flood, *Disarming Scripture*, 188.

Taken literally, it can be used to justify punitive, violent judgement, but as one journalist noted, “A faith that demands uncompromising fealty to a literal reading of its origin story seems to me a perilously brittle faith.”<sup>51</sup> Taken seriously, the narrative instead teaches us that God has dismantled the argument for violence, for if it did not work for him, how could it work for easily corrupted humans? There is no scourge that can drive out the human propensity towards domination and violence, only love can do that. We demand judgement but God offers mercy. The warrior God has hung up his bow. Should not his children do the same?

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Were there Dinosaurs on Noah’s Ark?” *The Atlantic*, October 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/the-genesis-code/379341/>.

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