

9. Noah's Ark

Gen 6-9

The first of these interwound stories is the common flood myth; the second adds the distinction between clean and unclean foods.

Among the many flood myths is the Babylonian story of Gilgamesh.¹ Why did the Canaanites borrow it? Perhaps for its “covenant” promise against excessive rain: the rainbow. In Genesis 6:5 - 9:19, that old story is interwound with a later update. In separating them, we note that the rewrite naturally mentions its god Yahweh, but at some point a Yahweh enthusiast has intruded “Yahweh” also into the *earlier* story, there replacing the Canaanite god El.

We start with motive. Why would a god kill, not only *all people*, but *all life*? Killing men is easy to explain. In Canaanite tradition, they had sought to live forever; to be like El himself. It is this concern which the old story gives us:

Gen 5:32. And Noah was five hundred years old; and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth . . . [6:3] And Yahweh said, My Spirit shall not strive with man for ever, for that he also is flesh: yet shall his days be a hundred and twenty years. [4] The Nephilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children unto them; the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown . . .

In the later Yahweh rewrite, this question is asked; the answer, in Gen 6:5 (below) is: the sins of men. But note, in the earlier 5:32 (above), that:

- The “mighty men of old” are *not pejorative*; they are celebrated as heroes. In the genealogy which follows the Flood story, we have the famous hero Nimrod. He is by no means disapproved of; quite the contrary.
- That leaves the Nephilim. They were evidently of superior stature, like the natives of Canaan whose size discouraged the Hebrews from attacking them, resulting in the penalty of the Forty Years’ wandering. Here, they are heroes.

We now look at the two Noah stories. What is the difference between them?

In the earlier story, all animals are saved; in the later, clean and unclean animals are distinguished. That detail has reminded some of the 4DH proposal; specifically, of documents “J” and “P.” Those following 4DH theory have often separated these stories, but not so as to consistently divide the “clean/unclean” strands from the others.² Thus does the 4DH theory fail in this application.

It seems necessary to approach the question afresh, and this we undertake in what follows. How have we sought to distinguish these two stories??

¹See Frazer **Folklore** 48, and for a full translation, George **Epic** (2003).

²For division into “J” and “P” see Bacon (1892) 109-116; Bissell (1892) 6-9; Addis (1893) 1/11-14 (J) and (1898) 2/201-205 (P); Ball (1896) 5-8; von Rad (1977) 118-134, Speiser (1964) 47-59’ Westermann (1974) 384-480; and finally Friedman (2003) 42-47. All these assign the “clean/unclean” material to *both* “J” and “P.”

The Two Flood Stories

Whatever relates to the clean/unclean distinction, or to sacrifice, is here assigned to the Later story; all else to the Earlier. Keywords are **emphasized**, to show how themes are divided among the two. Here is the result.

Earlier Story / El

Later Story / Yahweh (Italic)

6a (Later)

[6:5] **Yahweh** saw that the **wickedness of man** was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the **thoughts** of his heart was only evil continuously. [6] And it repented **Yahweh** that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. [7] And **Yahweh** said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the ground, both man, and beast, and creeping things, and birds of the heavens, for it repenteth me that I have made them. [8] But Noah found favor in the eyes of **Yahweh**.

6b (Earlier)

[6:9] These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a **righteous** man, and perfect in his generations; Noah walked with **El**. [10] And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. [11] And the earth was corrupt before **El**, and the earth was filled with violence. [12] And **El** saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for **all flesh** had corrupted their way upon the earth. [13] And **El** said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me, for the earth is **filled with violence** through them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. [14] **Make thee** an ark of gopher wood, rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.

6c (Later)

[6:15] *And this is how thou shalt make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits. [16] A light shalt thou make to the ark, and to a cubit thou shalt finish it upward, and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it.*

6d (Earlier)

[6:17] And I, behold, I do bring the flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is in the earth shall die. [18] But I will establish my **covenant** with thee; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. [19] And of every living thing of all flesh, two of **every sort** shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. [20] Of the birds after their kind, and of the cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of **every sort** shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. [21] And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them. [22] Thus did Noah; according to all that God **commanded him**, so did he.³

³Notice the lack of distinction among different foods: "And take thou unto thee of *all food that is eaten*, and gather it to thee, and it shall be food for thee, and for them." In the very next passages, from the Later story, that distinction *will* be made.

7a (Later)

[7:1] And **Yahweh** said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen **righteous** before me in this generation. [2] Of every **clean** beast thou shalt take to thee seven and seven, the male and his female; and of the beasts that are **not clean**, two, the male and his female; [3] Of the birds also of the heavens, seven and seven, male and female, to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth. [4] For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth **forty days** and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the ground. [5] And Noah did according unto all that **Yahweh commanded him**. [6] And Noah was **six hundred years** old when the flood of waters was upon the earth. [7] And Noah **went in**, his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood. [8] Of **clean** beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creepeth upon the ground, [9] there went in two and two unto Noah into the ark, male and female, as **El commanded Noah**. [10] And it came to pass after the seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth.

7b (Earlier)

[7:11a] In the **six hundredth** year of Noah's life,

7c (Later)

[7:11b] in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, **on the same day**,

7d (Earlier)

[7:11c] were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. [12] And the rain was upon the earth **forty days** and forty nights. [13] **In the selfsame day** entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; [14] they, and every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after its kind, every bird of every sort. [15] And they went in unto Noah in the ark, two and two, **of all flesh** wherein is the breath of life. [16] And they that went in, went in male and female **of all flesh**, as **El** commanded him; and **Yahweh**⁴ shut him in. [17] And the flood was **forty days** upon the earth, and the waters increased, and **bare up the ark**, and it was lifted up above the earth.

7e (Later)

[18] *And the waters prevailed, and increased greatly upon the earth; and **the ark went upon the face of the waters**.*

7f (Earlier)

[19] And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth, and all the high mountains that were under the whole heaven **were covered**.

7g (Later)

[20] *Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail, and the mountains **were covered**.*

⁴Here is the one case in the Noah story where "Yahweh" has been substituted for an original "El." Notice that another "El" in the same sentence has been left unchanged.

7h (Earlier)

[7:21] And **all flesh died** that moved upon the earth, both birds, and cattle, and beasts, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man; [22] all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, of all that was on the dry land, died.

7i (Later)

[7:23] *And every living thing was destroyed that was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and creeping things, and birds of the heavens; and they were destroyed from the earth; and Noah only was left, and they that were with him in the ark.* [24] *And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days.*

8a (Earlier)

[8:1] And **EI** remembered Noah, and all the beasts, and all the cattle, that were **with him in the ark**; and **EI** made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged; [2] the fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained; [3a] and the **waters returned from off the earth continually**,

8b (Later)

[8:3b] *And after the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters decreased.* [4] *And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat.* [5] *And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, were the tops of the mountains seen.*

8c (Earlier)

[8:6] And it came to pass **at the end of forty days**, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; [7] and he sent forth a raven,⁵ and it went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. [8] and he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; [9] but the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him to the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth; and he brought her in unto him into the ark. [10] And he stayed yet other seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark, [11] and the dove came in to him at eventide, and lo, in her mouth an olive-leaf plucked off; so Noah knew that the **waters were abated** from off the earth. [12] And he stayed yet other seven days, and sent forth the dove, and she returned not again unto him any more.

8d (Later)

[8:13] *And it came to pass in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dried.* [14] *And in the second month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dry.*

⁵The raven is an anomaly, retained from the original Babylonian story, where three different birds were sent out: a dove, a swallow, and a raven; see Day **Creation** 104.

8e (Earlier)

[8:15] And El spake unto Noah, saying, [16] Go forth from the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee. [17] Bring forth with thee **every** living thing that is with thee of all flesh, both birds, and cattle, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth. [18] And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him: [19] every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, whatsoever moveth upon the earth, after their families, went forth out of the ark.

8f (Later)

[8:20] *And Noah builded an altar unto **Yahweh**, and took of every **clean beast**, and of every **clean bird**, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. [21] And **Yahweh** smelled the sweet savor; and **Yahweh** said in his heart, **I will not again** curse the ground any more for man's sake, for that the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done. [22] While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.*

9a (Earlier)

[9:1] And El blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, **Be fruitful and multiply**, and replenish the earth. [2] And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon **every beast** of the earth, and upon every bird of the heavens; with all wherewith the ground teemeth, and all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. [3] **Every moving thing that liveth shall be food for you**; as the green herb have I given you all.

9b (Later)

[9:4] *But flesh with the life thereof, the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. [5] And surely your blood, the blood of your lives, will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man's brother, will I require the life of man. [6] Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for **in the image** of God made he man. [7] And you, be ye fruitful and **multiply**; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and **multiply** therein.*

A Covenant for Canaan

At various points in the Bible, a Covenant is given: a statement of the terms of engagement between the human and the divine. There was the Sinai Covenant, early in Exodus (§16), and the Covenant Code, later in Exodus (§17). These are Yahweh's covenants with his chosen people.

But there was also a Covenant given to Canaan, a promise that their future relationship with their god El would not be one of destruction, but of peace. It is that Covenant that Canaan had sought by borrowing the Babylonian flood story in the first place. It was promised in Gen 6:18, at the beginning of the story, and now, at the end of the story, it is given.

This is what those who borrowed the Flood story were looking for.

And here it is:

9c (Earlier)

[9:8] And **EI** spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, [9] And I, behold, I establish my **covenant** with you, and with your seed after you; [10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that go out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. [11] And I will establish my **covenant** with you: neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. [12] And **EI** said, This is the token of the **covenant** which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: [13] I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a **covenant** between me and the earth. [14] And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud, [15] And I will remember my **covenant**, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters **shall no more** become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16] And the bow shall be in the cloud, and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between **EI** and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. [17] And **EI** said unto Noah, This is the token of the **covenant** which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.

It is very beautiful, is it not? It does not exclude other peoples, as the Yahweh covenants always do. It is for everyone, "every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."

Unclean Foods

As for the narrative separation, it works perfectly. The clean/unclean remake can indeed be separated from its predecessor. The original story is there complete. The second story is *incomplete*, and it never was complete. It consists solely of rewriting: updates to paragraphs or lines of the original story.

The two contrast in many ways. The flood lasts 40 days (the number 40 symbolizes "one generation") in Earlier; but 150 days (half a year) in Later. Earlier uses the "blood guilt" theme of Genesis 4. Later, "in his image," alludes to Genesis 1:26-27, part of the Creation story [§10].

There is more of interest in these paired stories, especially if we recognize them as reflecting different historical periods. On the question of human guilt, Earlier is concerned with *actions*, whereas Later also considers *intent*: "the thoughts of men's hearts" (6:5). That is a major advance in judicial thinking.

Behind Earlier lies an ancient myth, adapted from a neighboring culture. Later was not written independently and later added to Earlier, as 4DH holds. No; it was composed ad hoc, *precisely to update the Earlier story theologically*.

These two are the sum and total of all the "sources" here involved.

Postscript: The Tower of Babel

The descendants of Noah's sons, listed in Gen 9, complete that second account of the peopling of the earth. The Gen 9 list wastes little time on the evolution of a person into a town, or vice versa. It is simply assumed, and we have in the Noah lineage such "persons" as Tarshish, Cush, Sidon, and Ophir. A later passage, Gen 10:8-10, looking ahead to the next chapter, says of Cush,

Gen 10:8-10. And Cush begat Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before Yahweh . . . and the beginning of his kingdom was Babel.⁶

Again we have the ancient mighty men, whom we met in Gen 6:1-4. In Gen 11, we pick up on Nimrod, with another account of the peopling of the world; here, the division of one people into several, all speaking different languages.

What aroused the anger of Yahweh was not the one language, but the ability of those speaking the *same* language to cooperate on large building projects, such as this tower, meant to reach to the heavens. Again we have the crime of Adam and Eve, who aspired to the knowledge that would make them like God, and become themselves immortal. To confound that aspiration, God banished them from Eden. Here, one nation is divided into many. "So Yahweh scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (Gen 11:8). The Tower of Babel story occupies Gen 11:1-9.

What are the sources for the Babel story? There are many folklore parallels, but the "Tower of Babel" story in Genesis may have been taken from real life. Two such towers were actually made at Babylon. Frazer reports:

Of two such gigantic temples the huge mouldering remains are to be seen at Babylon to this day. One of them rises among the ruins of Babylon itself, and still bears the name of Babil; the other is situated across the river at Borsippa, some eight or nine miles away to the south-west, and is known as Birs-Nimrud . . . Scholars are not agreed as to which of these ancient edifices was the original Tower of Babel; local and Jewish tradition identifies the legendary tower with the ruins of Birs-Nimrud at Borsippa.⁷

If we accept "local and Jewish tradition," it turns out that Nimrod ("Nimrud") is not tangential to the real story of the Tower of Babel. He is central to it.

And we may end by noting again the parallel between the Tower of Babel and the attempt of Adam and Eve to be equal to God. *The theme is the same.*

⁶One suggestion for the origin of the name "Nimrod" is King Ninurta of Babylon. In Micah 5:6, the land of Nimrod and the land of Assyria appear in parallel, as enemies. This is another case where scraps of older (and historically more accurate) tradition may have been preserved alongside their later theological rewrites.

⁷Frazer **Folklore** (1918, as abridged 1923) 145.