



Scenes from the Old Testament

Noah and the Flood

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Genesis 8 : 20 – 9 : 7 Matthew 25: 31–end

Illustration of Noah's Ark from the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493)¹

Noah and his ark is one of the best-loved stories in the entire Bible. No doubt the main reason is the extensive cast: a story offering parts for the entire animal kingdom is hard to beat. As a result, no nursery is complete without a wooden ark and an accompanying menagerie.

For adults the ark story is the oldest and most familiar representative of a classic genre: the apocalyptic disaster story. If you scan the cinema listings, it is rare not to find an example nestled alongside other standard movie fares: the rom coms, the animated children's movies, the thrillers. At the moment you can see *The 5th Wave*, which if the reviews are to be believed is apocalyptically awful.

In a disaster movie the entire planet or sometimes a little more parochially Western Civilization or simply the United States is threatened by a global catastrophe. In *Independence Day* it was an alien invasion; in *28 Days Later* it was a pandemic; in *The Day after Tomorrow* it was an unprecedented winter storm; in *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* it was an asteroid.

We are not well equipped to think about catastrophes on such global scales. Nor do thousands and millions of people dying make for great scripts – at least not on their own. Instead, the films focus our attention on a disparate, quirky group who fight for survival. Against improbably long odds, this small band makes it, as a result of a combination of a large dash of luck, quick thinking, and a significant amount of courage and perseverance. In our uncertain world, in the face of unnamed apocalyptic terrors, the good news is that *you dear viewer* can survive if you have the right moral and intellectual qualities. And though the world will never be the same again, such films come to their close with a strange hopefulness. The survivors – usually including at least one young couple – step out into a post-apocalyptic world, somehow cleansed of all our world's ills. Humanity turns a leaf in its history, and begins on a fresh page.

¹ <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-INC-00000-A-00007-00002-00888/67>

Noah and the flood is the archetypal disaster story. A cataclysmic flood destroys the entire world. Noah and his sons survive against the odds. When they disembark from the ark, Noah's family encounters a world made new, and they proceed to repopulate it.

Disaster stories, whether ancient or modern, provide true mirrors of the deep-seated anxieties of human societies. They articulate our fears about threats over which we have no control. Who can say when we will encounter an alien species, and if we do so whether it will be more advanced than we are, and whether it will be full of benign intent? The story of the most advanced species on our planet is not encouraging. What could we do if we discovered an asteroid unerringly aimed at our home planet? A century after the Spanish flu, when will the next pandemic strike, and will our societies be able to cope?

As we have known since the nineteenth century, the flood story is a very old disaster story. And its origins were not in Israel. This was a great shock to the Victorians, but it shouldn't be to us. In the hill country of Palestine you are most unlikely to worry about a flood on which a boat might float away. The rain comes in winter storms and rushes down the sides of V-shaped valleys. The challenge for the ancient population was to build terraces on the steep valley sides so that the water drained away more slowly. In other words, the Israelites problem was keeping the water, not drowning in it. By contrast, in the wide alluvial plains of Mesopotamia there is a very real risk of flooding. Just a few months ago areas of Iraq were badly flooded. And you may recall news stories about the inundations of May 2013.

The ancient Israelites have taken this Mesopotamian story of a flood and transformed it to address their own concerns. The biblical story opens with the words:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. 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."

The land of Israel is precariously located on a fertile bridge of land between the great imperial centres of ancient times: Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is said that an invading army has marched through Palestine on average every eleven years. The small Hebrew Kingdoms were always in danger of being fought over by the great powers of their day. The existential threat they feared was unrestrained violence.

Remarkably, the flood is no longer the problem, but the solution to the problem. But what kind of solution is this? God cleanses his world of violence, but only by reducing it to the watery chaos that it had been at the very beginning before God spoke the words 'Let there be light' – from chaos to creation and back to chaos in the space of six chapters. It would appear that creation is no more than an aborted experiment.

The reason why this is so lies in the distinctive Hebrew transformation of the flood story. The problem lies not outside human beings – no alien race, no asteroid, no pandemic. The problem lies within. 'The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.' It is one of the most disagreeable parts of the Bible's message that it insists that our problems do not lie outside ourselves, but within. That most unpleasant idea in the Bible: sin. The Bible insists that we need saving: and it is ourselves we need saving from.

But if this is so: how does God move from the watery chaos that has returned to re-creation? At first glance the story of Noah and the flood is most unsatisfactory. As we heard in our readings this evening, at the end of the flood God says to himself, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." Despite the flood, nothing has changed about human beings. According to the biblical writer, they are still bent on evil. If anything changes it is God. "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creature". This is what the Bible calls grace – here expressed in beautiful lines that remind us of our dependence on God's creation,

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.

The disaster movies that we go to see in the cinema offer a quite different perspective. They reinforce our belief in individualism and in individualistic solutions to social problems. Typically disaster movies are slow to get going. They need to introduce us to the heroes and heroines, establishing them as both ordinary, but also virtuous: brave, honest and loyal. And as we watch, we think we see mirror images of ourselves. We too can survive the nameless fears that hover at the edges of our lives by dint of our courage and decency.

In contrast, the biblical flood story does not linger over Noah's introduction. The stories about his character come not at the beginning of the story, but at its end. When they do so, they reveal a rather flawed figure. Noah gets drunk, and then expresses his frustration with his son who finds the episode rather amusing. When the story first introduces Noah it is with the disarming statement 'Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord'. Once again, it is a story of grace.

The genius of disaster stories is that they unsettle us and reassure us in almost equal measure. They unsettle us by reminding us of the threats to human existence, but reassure us that we can overcome them. The biblical story of Noah, like the Christian gospel itself, will also unsettle us and reassure us, but in quite a different way. It reassures us that there is nothing to fear, our world will continue by God's grace. But it also unsettles us for it insists that we are deluded if we think it.