WHY WAS GOD OPTIMISTIC AFTER THE FLOOD?[1]

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The decision of the Creator to destroy His handiwork after only 10 generations of human history must come with some astonishment to readers of the Bible. After all, only four chapters earlier we read: *And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good . . .* (Gen. 1:31). What had gone wrong?

Well, for one thing, man: *And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth . . .* (6:5) *and it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth* (6:6).

While disappointing, Verse 5 is, in a sense, understandable. For the Creator had made man *in His image and in His likeness*, which in part implies that the human being was given the capacity for freewill. That means the ability to choose evil should he so desire. Indeed, man, on the very day of his creation, had already disobeyed God! (Sanhedrin 38b). However, what is not as understandable is the Creator's drastic reaction: *'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth . . .'* (6:7).

What was it about the "wickedness" of the generations up to Noah that prompted the Creator to repent that He had made man and to decide to "blot him out" and to start anew with Noah and the creatures with him? A few chapters later (Ch. 12), the Creator agrees with Abraham that justice, a principle which evidently obligates God as well as man, requires that only the wicked be destroyed and the righteous saved. How then shall we understand the implication of the text that Noah and his family were the only individuals at that time worthy of survival?

There is another difficulty. It is not only man in whom the Creator is disappointed: *'Every living substance that I have made* [man, beast, creeping things, fowl . . .] *will I blot out from off the face of the earth'* (6:7, 7:4). But why?

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*For all **flesh** had corrupted their way upon the earth* (6:12) presumably includes animals, but in what sense can non-human life-forms be said to "corrupt their way"?[2]

It would also appear that one of the effects of the Flood, and therefore part of its purpose, was to transform the entire geographic physiognomy of the planet: *'Behold, I will destroy them* [all flesh] ***together with the earth***' (6:13).[3] There seems to be an emphasis that in some sense the earth itself, i.e., nature as a whole, had become "corrupt": *And the **earth** was corrupt before God, and the **earth** was filled with violence, and God saw the **earth** and behold it was corrupt for all flesh has corrupted their way upon the **earth*** (6:11,12).

References to the activity of *fountains of the great deep* (7:11, 8:2) probably include volcanic eruptions, which not only change the contours of the earth but have drastic effects on the climate.

I wish to suggest that what had "gone wrong" with both man and beast were not moral lapses (obviously impossible in the case of non-humans), but rather some fundamental defects had become apparent in the entire scheme of things on earth, in man and beast generically and in the total environment. Thus, Chapters 6-8 of Genesis should be seen as a follow-up of the natural history of the world, a sort of transition or settling-in period, stretching from Creation to "real" history which begins with the Patriarchs. While based on a particular historical event, the biblical story of Noah and the Flood is to be understood primarily as a metaphor giving the Torah view of all the destructions and mass extinctions which paleontology has revealed to have taken place on this planet. In this single story, the Bible collapses events that took place in different time periods in connection with the development of non-human as well as human life.

Science has shown that the development of life-forms on earth was not an even process which could have been predicted on the basis of certain principles. Rather, it was a process punctuated by sudden violent mass extinctions in which over 90 percent of once existing plant, marine, and animal genera were wiped out![4] The biblical story is meant to teach that it has been Divine guidance (rather than "dumb luck") that is responsible for the over-all direction and sequential order taken by this very complicated process. It involved the dynamics of plate tectonics, continental drift, ice ages, meteorite impacts, climate

changes, combined with natural selection and genetic mutations, which led to the appearance of new and ever more complex forms. And, as the Flood story illustrates, the destructions were not total but selective. The life forms that survive on earth, in the air, and in the sea are those that can symbiotically share the changed environment with man, are useful to him, and can fit into the larger ecosystem which is the planet Earth.

According to this interpretation, all forms of non-human life on earth had become "corrupt" in the sense that the evolutionary process had taken a "wrong turn." Thus, for example, looking out upon the earth some 60 million years ago, the Creator sees huge dinosaurs in all of their frightening varieties in "unchallenged possession of all environments for large-bodied terrestrial creatures."[5] While mammals are already in existence, "they are small creatures, living in the nooks and crannies of a dinosaur's world."[6] This is unacceptable to the Creator, as such a situation does not permit the appearance of man or the development of mammals useful to him. So a sudden destruction occurs, in which the dinosaurs are blotted out and the earth is made safe for man and mammals.

Recent discoveries in anthropology are also helping to clarify the picture in regard to the appearance of Homo Sapiens. It is no longer believed that we arose as a kind of "global evolutionary process encompassing all members of the human lineage wherever they may have lived."[7] Instead, Homo Sapiens appeared quite suddenly, as a distinct coherent entity in a particular place, probably in Africa. At the same time, other hominids such as the Neanderthals were still in existence and were living in Europe.[8]

This probably is the situation that the Bible, in one of its most obscure passages, seems to be referring to:

> *And it was when men began to multiply on the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair and they took for themselves wives from whomsoever they chose* (6:1-2).

The text seems to be referring to two different types of humans: "daughters of men" and "sons of God" and suggests that the interaction between them involved violence and exploitation.[9] It is immediately after these verses that we are told that the Lord *sees that the wickedness of man was great in the earth*

and their destruction is contemplated. As in the case of the corruption of the non-human life forms, the wickedness of man would seem to refer to pre-historic times before the rudiments of socialization had appeared and when environmental conditions made for a life which was "nasty, brutish and short," blocking the development of moral sentiments. It is against this background that the decision of the Creator to blot out *all flesh, fowl and cattle and beast and every swarming thing that swarmed upon the earth and every man* (7:21) must be seen. This, then, was not some retributive punishment of an angry god for particular sins, but primarily a mid-course correction of the evolutionary process; a Divine intervention by means of mass extinctions of unwanted species followed by a selected survival of more benign forms of life. This was designed to create a reasonably stable climate for the further development of Homo Sapiens, a creature created *in the image of God*, the hominid in whom God *breathed the breath of life*. This endowed him with the faculties of conceptual thought, speech, self-consciousness and self-identity, freedom of will and a moral sense.

The above interpretation is borne out by the promises and blessings given by the Creator after the Flood. As this small surviving group of human beings, cattle and beasts, birds and reptiles enter into the more friendly environment of the post-diluvial world, the Creator promises them a world in which the seasonal cycles will not undergo drastic changes as before: *'All the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease'* (8:22).

Unlike previous ages, in which monstrous beasts dominated the earth, the skies and the seas, and the very existence of Homo Sapiens was threatened, man is now blessed:

> *'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. And the fear and dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every fowl of the air and upon all with which the ground teems and upon all the fish of the sea, into your hand are they delivered'* (9:3).

There is also an implicit promise that the type of life-forms that will now populate the earth will constitute an ecological system, including a food chain which will ensure the perpetuation of human society: *'Every moving thing that lives shall be for you for food, as the green herb have I given you all'* (8:3).

Having aborted those tendencies in the evolutionary process which were inimical to man and his needs, and having restructured the physical universe, the Creator seeks to enter into a covenant with His creatures and is prepared, from His side, to guarantee the future unconditionally.[10]

From a theological perspective, the implications of the text that God is in some sense "disappointed" with His Creation and "regrets" having made man are extremely difficult, particularly after having pronounced it all "very good." In rabbinic literature and in Lurianic kabbalah there are echoes of there having been defects in the process of Creation, and of God having created and then destroyed earlier worlds.[11] Perhaps a hint of the possibility of things not working out perfectly, 100 percent of the time, is to be found in the fact that only the original light and man are said to be created **directly** by God. Other forms of life are brought into existence **indirectly**, with God calling upon the earth and the waters to bring forth plant and animal life. Thus: *Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul* (2:7), as compared to: *And God said, 'Let the earth put forth grass . . . . let the waters swarm with living creatures . . . . let the earth bring forth the living creatures. . .* ' (1:11, 20, 24).

We are not told how this was to be done. However, on the basis of what we know today about the long and complicated process as to how the earth and water gave rise to life and then to consciousness, it is clear that at certain junctures a wrong turn could have been taken. The text which describes God's disappointment and regret is simply an anthropomorphic way to make comprehensible His act of selective destruction. On the other hand, God's summary judgment that *all He had made was very good* should be seen as based on a perception of how it all ultimately turned out.[12]

We have as yet not explained the basis for God's optimism regarding man himself, given his nature as described by his Creator before the Flood: *And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man* [ra'at ha-adam] *was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart* [yetzer mahshevot libo] *was only evil* [rak ra] *continually* (6:5)

Although man now found himself in a more friendly environment, why should it be thought that the *imagination of the thought of his heart* would

now be any different than they were before the Flood? Indeed, after the Flood, fol-
lowing Noah's bringing of a burnt offering in thanksgiving, the text offers what appears to be a rather strange reason for God's determination: *'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake for* [ki][13] *the imagination of man's heart is evil* [yetzer lev ha-adam ra] *from his youth [minaarav*]' (8:21).

Does not this expression only seem to be affirming man's evil nature? How could a condition which was given as the cause of God's destroying the world now be given as the reason for God's promise never again to *curse the ground*? A closer reading may yield the answer. Before the Flood, when man's life was a continual struggle for the bare necessities of existence against a harsh climate, powerful predators and competing hominids, then *every imagination of the thought of his heart* was bent on selfish survival, with little room for anything else, and thus *continually and exclusively evil*. After the Flood, however, when man is freed from the primitive pressures of sheer existence and begins to experience periods of leisure, a new evaluation is made of man. Behold, here is a creature capable of sentiments of gratitude and of expressing them by an offering. "Man," his Creator proclaims, "is educable"! Subject him to positive experiences and with some guidance man can change for the better.

Here the text adds one single Hebrew word that makes all the difference . . . *for the imagination of man's heart is evil* ***from his youth***. Man is the only creature whose transition from childhood to adulthood, i.e., period of youth, is so prolonged and so uneven. Sexual and aggressive "imaginings" can appear long before there has been a corresponding physical development. Physical signs of adulthood can appear before there is a corresponding emotional maturity or socially acceptable means of expression. Once it is understood that the imagination of man's heart is evil **because** of the peculiar nature of his adolescence, ways can be found to socialize man, develop his moral sentiments, and educate him in the ways of justice and righteousness.

Thus, there will be no further need for mass extinctions or *to curse the ground* or *to blot out all creatures*. The Bible announces that the Creator has established a covenant with nature and with man *for perpetual generations* (9:12). The way has been cleared for the historical process to begin.

NOTES

1. The Hebrew expression for the biblical "Flood" in its initial occurrences consists of two words: מבול מים (6:17) [a *mabul* of waters] or מי המבול, [waters of the *mabul*.] This implies that the word *mabul* itself does not necessarily imply "water." Later, the story of the Flood is referred to simply as מבול (9:11) or המבול (7:17). The word מבול is etymologically traced to roots which mean "destruction." See comments of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Seforno on 6:17.
2. See Rashi on 6:12: ". . . even cattle, beasts and fowl consorted with those who were not their species."
3. This is Rashi's translation.
4. See Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.,1989) pp. 278-286. Also Richard Fortey, *Life* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1999) pp. 202-209.
5. Gould, p. 338.
6. Gould, p. 319.
7. Fortey, pp. 289-306.
8. The term "sons of God" would suggest that they were in some sense the more highly developed type. The word translated as "fair" in 6:2 is the Hebrew word *tovot* which is perhaps better translated as "goodly." That is to say, the males of the "superior" group found the daughters of the other group "useful" in some sense, and "took them" (forcibly?) as "wives". Anthropologists are not sure whether there was interbreeding between Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens.
9. On the basis of contemporary scientific knowledge, we certainly have no reason to believe that the current over-all benign conditions for human life on this planet will continue indefinitely. It is interesting therefore to note that, according to the Bible, man's confidence in the stability and permanence of nature rests upon an historical covenant made by God with man and was not part of the original creation!
10. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) on the concept of "Breaking of the Vessels," pp. 265-268. See also Genesis Rabbah 9:2.
11. We see this principle followed in the summary description of the creation of the human being in Chapter 1:27 of Genesis: *And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.* However, Chapter II is, in a sense, a "flashback" with a more detailed description of the creation of man and woman.
12. The word *ki may* sometimes be translated as "although."