

PARASHAH FIVE

Genesis 6:9–7:24; Isaiah 54:9–10; 1Peter 3:13–22

notes by Tim Hegg

Our *parashah* this Shabbat is very familiar to us. The story of Noah and the ark is one of the most popular stories of the Tanach, familiar to people across the landscape of our modern world. But while it may be well known, it is not that well understood. The ramifications of this early text of *B'reishit* (Genesis) are profound and far-reaching. What is more, the questions that this text raises are many and difficult. For instance, what are we to make of the fact that the animals are distinguished between clean and unclean? And how did Noah get the animals to come, and to even enter the ark? When the animals came together, there were surely those who naturally preyed upon others—how were they able to “get along” at this point? Did God really shut the door behind Noah and was the flood of such a nature that it covered the whole earth, or only the earth as Noah knew it? These and many more questions naturally arise from a careful reading of the text.

But before we look at some of these obvious questions and seek answers to them, it will be good for us to look at the overall message of the *parashah* and ask ourselves what the primary application is for us as we read this ancient text. We cannot help but be struck by the opening description of Noah (6:9-10). First is his name, נֹחַ, which means “to rest” or “take a rest.” The name itself conjures up the sense of “peace” or “tranquility.” In a world which (as the text goes on to say) was essentially wicked and corrupt, a man named “Rest” (Noah), living in accordance with God’s righteous ways, stands as an example to all who would live righteously before HaShem. It is possible to live righteously in an ungodly world.

The text goes on to describe Noah as אִישׁ צַדִּיק, “a righteous man.” What does this phrase mean so early in the text of the Tanach? This combination is only found 3 other times in the Tanach (2Sam 4:11; 1Ki 2:32; Ezek 23:45) and in each case refers to someone who is innocent of guilt, particularly as it relates to a specific situation. Yet this description of Noah appears to be broader—Noah is a righteous man because, as the next term indicates, he was “blameless in all his ways” (תָּמִים, *tamim*). *Tamim* is used in reference to sacrificial animals which are “free from defect” (Ex 12:5). Noah, then, was a man whose life was righteous before God, whose character had no defect, for his actions—his “halachah,” the way he walked, was blameless before God. In comparison with the generation in which he lived, he must have stood out like a shining light!

But the text does not leave us to speculate how Noah could be judged as “righteous” and “blameless,” for the final phrase in v. 9 tells us explicitly: “Noah walked with God.” The word “walk” is the *hitpael* of הלך, (*halach*) not the normal *qal*, and it is in the perfect aspect. (The same *hitpael* stem of הלך is used of Abraham in Gen 17:1-2 as well as the word תָּמִים). What does this indicate? The *hitpael* stem of this verb indicates a regular walking, so we might say that Noah’s life was characterized as “walking with God.” It was something that was a regular aspect of his life—something by which he was known. We might even translate it “Noah kept on walking with God.” What does it mean to “walk with God?” We’ve already encountered this phrase regarding Enoch (5:22, 24), and the idea of “walking with God” is hinted at in the Eden narrative when we read that the sound of God walking in the garden (cf. 3:8) was heard by Adam and Chavah. Apparently this was something with which they were familiar, at least familiar enough to recognize the sound. But what does it mean to “walk with God?”

The Sages (Mid. Rab. *Gen* 30.10) note that in the case of Abraham (*Gen* 17) God tells him to “walk before Me” while in the case of Enoch and Noah, the text says that they “walked with God.” If we are to see a difference between these two designations, the first (“to walk with God”) would seem to emphasize companionship while the second (“to walk before God”) may point to approval or guidance. The concept of “walk” is that of one’s life, so we might just as well understand the phrase to mean “live with God” or “live before God.” To live with God is to make each and every decision with Him as one’s Master, King, and companion. To live before God emphasizes living in accordance with His holy designs. The one leads to the other. Surely Abraham, of whom it is said, “walk before Me,” had experienced “walking with God,” for he had followed God’s commands, left his family and country, and had gone to the Land which God had shown him. So in our text it seems best to understand the phrase that Noah “walked with God” to mean that he had come to know the true God, to live in His presence, to know Him in truth. The actual means by which this came about for Noah is found in the previous verse: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” The word “favor” is *חן*, which also is the common word used to denote the concept of “grace.” Why did Noah “find grace in the eyes of the Adonai” (a phrase which simply means “to like someone”)? Why did God reveal Himself to Noah? Here we come to the crux of the matter: God, of His own sovereign will, chose to reveal Himself to Noah and to favor him with His self-revelation and blessing. Moreover, He chose him to further His redemptive plan for all of mankind. That “Noah found favor in the eyes of Adonai” is the fountain out of which the rest of the passage flows.

Here, then, at the beginning of the story, is the goal to which everything proceeds. This goal is that mankind might “walk with God.” Thus, the Torah was given to Israel that she might commune with her God. Moreover, the Messiah has come, and will come yet again, because God’s ultimate purpose is that He might dwell among His people, and might share life with them. Whenever we allow a means (such as the Torah) to become an end, we have missed the mark. The Torah was given to us, not as an end in itself, but as a means to bring about communion with God. So the Messiah Himself taught us that He came “to reveal the Father.” His coming, while certainly the zenith of world’s history, is still not the final goal. He came so that He might “bring us to God.” This is not to deny that He is One with the Father, and that ultimately every knee will bow to Him and confess that He is Sovereign over all (*Phil* 2). What I do intend to emphasize, however, is that the ultimate goal in God’s eternal plan of redemption is that of communion with mankind—a communion unfettered by the sin and rebellion of man’s heart. “Walking with God” right now, in our everyday existence, is a foretaste of this eternal communion.

In contrast to the two terms used of Noah (“righteous” and “blameless”), the state of mankind (i.e., the land, personified to include all who dwelt upon the earth) is described by the terms “corrupt” (*שחַתָּה*, *shachat*) and full of “violence” (*חַמָּס*, *chamas*). These two verbs characterize sinful debauchery and self-centered enterprise at the expense of others. Here we have contrasted depraved man over against redeemed, the unrighteousness of man’s heart evident in his general living in contrast to a new heart made receptive to God and enabled to walk in His righteous ways.

In keeping with the overall structure of *B’reishit*, our section begins with *אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת*, “these are the generations of . . .” Encountered first in 2:4, the rest of the book may be divided in accordance with this phrase or similar ones (cf. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). The “offspring of the woman” promised in 3:15 becomes the focal point of the narrative and thus successive generations are listed with His appearance ever in mind. In our text we discover that

Noach had three sons, Shem (meaning “name”), Cham (meaning “hot” and related to the Hebrew concept of “anger”), and Yafet (meaning “right” or “beautiful”). The naming of the sons here sets up the necessary information to inform the later narrative (9:27) in which curses and blessings are pronounced upon the sons of Noach. The order of the names may or may not indicate birth order. In chapter 10 Yafet is listed first, then Cham, then Shem, although Shem is noted as being older than Yafet. At any rate, the narrative clearly gives a priority to Shem, for he is the father of the Shemites, from whom (presumably) Abram is descended.

The remainder of our *parashah* is given over to the familiar story of the building of the ark and the gathering of animals into it. God had determined (thus the language “the destruction has come before Me”) to destroy His creation with a flood of water. In the midst of this destruction, however, God establishes a covenant with Noach and with all of His creation. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the narrative is the common verb כָּרַת, *karat*, “to cut” used of the covenant with Noach. Normally in the Hebrew the terminology of covenant making is “to cut a covenant.” But with Noach the word “cut” is never used in connection with making the covenant. Instead, only the verb קָוַם (in the hifil), “to establish” and the verb נָתַן, “to give.” This may be significant for the simple reason that the covenant with Noach is given as the necessary corollary to the promise of seed given to the Chavah (3:15). If the promise that the woman’s seed would inflict a fatal blow to the head of the serpent’s seed was to be fulfilled in a future generation, then the enduring presence of mankind upon the earth was a necessary part of the covenant. In “establishing” the covenant with Noach, God hints at the fulfillment of the “seed” promise as coming in yet future generations. Here is another hint that the purpose of Moses as he wrote these stories (superintended by the Ruach HaKodesh) was the revelation of the Promised One.

The questions raised earlier regarding the events of the ark and the gathering of animals into it can only find their answers in the miraculous hand of HaShem. Attempts to find some kind of rational explanation for how the animals came willingly into the ark inevitably fall short. We are left with two options: either this story is simply a remaking of the common “flood stories” of the Ancient Near East (so the liberal scholars would have us believe) or this is, once again, the biblical history of God’s miraculous hand at work in our world. In the end, to believe that God miraculously brought the animals into the ark, actually closed the door behind Noach and his family, and inundated the earth with water is no less difficult than to believe the convoluted rationale of the liberals! If we hold that God spoke the worlds into being at creation, it seems a far less “difficult” feat for Him to pull off the flood and save Noach and family in the ark! Once again we are left believing that what God has said is true. This is the essence of true faith.

Moreover, if God created animals with some innate sense of when to migrate or hibernate, then surely He could instinctively put into the consciousness of animals to “migrate” to the location of the ark. Whatever the case, we must still see this as a miracle performed directly by God upon His creation.

A great deal has been written regarding the flood, and indeed, it is an event that finds its way into the writings of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures and legends. The flood reveals a number of things from a theological perspective. First, it is clear that mankind’s sinful condition could not be remedied by himself. His heart (essential character) was wicked, so that his thoughts were continually bent toward rebellion against God (6:5ff). The flood, therefore, reveals God’s perspective toward sin. It is entirely contrary to God’s nature, and makes impossible the goal of God dwelling with man. In order for their creative purpose to be realized, mankind’s heart would have to be

changed in order to overcome their sinful bent, and render them able to live in righteousness.

Second, the flood indicates to us God's faithfulness to His word. The promise He had made to Chavah in 3:15 could not be realized if all of mankind were destroyed. God's choosing of Noah, and His plan to preserve mankind through him and his family, emphasizes His purpose to be faithful to His previous promise. The flood would wipe out mankind, yet God's promise is secure: the seed of the woman would be preserved in order to bring about the victory over the deceiver.

Third, the flood demonstrates, in measure, the righteous anger of God against sin: He will take severe measures to punish sin and to bring about justice commensurate with His own divine holiness. To our way of thinking, the mass destruction of life evidenced in the flood seems too drastic. Yet if we attempt to understand the holiness of God, we recognize that His utter perfection stands as even a greater reality than the wickedness of man's sin. Taken against the backdrop of God's holiness, the destruction caused by the flood is understandable.

In our Apostolic section (1Pet 3:13-22), the ark is viewed midrashically as an illustration of salvation itself. In the same way the the *mikvah* (ritual bath) illustrates the hope of life after death (the unclean person enters the water as a burial and comes up as though resurrected), so Noah and his family enter the water of the flood (itself an agent of death) and are preserved by being in the ark. Peter's words in v. 21 could easily be misunderstood if taken out of context, and without the idea of *midrash* in which they are cast. "... baptism now saves you," if taken apart from the full apostolic teaching, sounds strange! Surely the act of the *mikvah* saves no one—salvation is accomplished through the redemption won by Yeshua's death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. But Peter's point is that only those who are encompassed within the redemptive work of the Messiah are saved, and the *mikvah* illustrates this. Even as Noah and his family were "in the ark" and thus were preserved through the waters of death, so the believer who is "in the Messiah" is sheltered from the wrath of God against sin and sinners. Messiah is the ark, and all who are in Him are preserved from the wrath of God. Peter's point is that the *mikvah* is the fitting ceremony that demonstrates this reality.

Peter also notes the role of Messiah in the very days of Noah. He writes (in vv. 18ff):

For Messiah also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

In the early Christian Church, this text was misunderstood to mean that Yeshua ascended to Hades (understood as the place of the souls of those who had died) to give a "second chance" to those who had died in their unbelief. Thus, the Apostles Creed reads:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified [dead], and buried;
He descended into Hades. The third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty....

But the idea that Yeshua ascended to Hades (apparently during the time His body was in the tomb) is not substantiated by any other Scriptures, and is not taught elsewhere in Peter’s epistles. Rather, those who were “in prison” describes those who lived in the days of Noah, who were doomed by their unrighteousness to perish in the flood. When it states that Yeshua, “in the spirit” went and preached to those who were in prison, we should understand Peter’s words to mean that the spirit of Messiah was active in the message of Noah as he called his generation to repentance and submission to God. Even as the Messiah is active today in the whole proclamation of the gospel, so He was active in Noah’s day as well. Noah preached the same message of the good news as we proclaim today. This is the point of Peter’s message: The gospel comes to us with the same message as in Noah’s day: repentance toward God, and faith in God’s promise of redemption (centered in the Promised One, Yeshua). While we now have the fuller picture because we stand at a point in history subsequent to the coming of Yeshua, the basic message of Gospel is the same as that which Noah proclaimed. This highlights the fact that there has always been only one way of salvation. Yeshua’s words in Jn 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,” reveal a truth that is neither bound by time nor culture.

In the *haftarah* chosen to accompany this *parashah*, God refers to the flood in the days of Noah and His promise to never again destroy the earth with a flood. Even as He has maintained His promise not to destroy the earth with a flood, so His faithfulness to Israel will endure. He will never remove His lovingkindness (חֶסֶד, *chesed*) from them, nor will His covenant of peace (בְּרִית שְׁלוֹם) with Israel ever fail. Here we see how the covenant made with Noah and the covenant made with Israel are intertwined. The faithfulness of God to the one is linked to His maintaining the other. This has significant theological ramifications. For those who deny the story of the flood or who relegate it to ancient mythology, have likewise negated God’s covenant promises to Israel, for the two covenants are inextricably bound together in Isaiah’s prophecy. Here we see once again that the historical covenants narrated throughout the Tanach do not stand independent of each other, but are woven together to reveal God’s full and complete plan of salvation.

Furthermore, all of the covenants reveal in dramatic ways not only the faithfulness of God to keep His word, but also His mercy and compassion. For if we consider *why* God would bind Himself in covenant to men, the only possible answer is His love. This is the message of the last line of our *haftarah* reading (Is 54:10):

For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake,
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,”
Says Adonai who has compassion on you.

The Hebrew of the last line is אָמַר מִרְחֶמֶיךָ יְהוָה, literally “says your compassion-giving One, Adonai.” This is like the loving salutation in a letter a husband might send to his wife: “affectionately yours” or “your loving husband.” Indeed, the “Book of Comfort” (Is 40–66) is God’s love letter to His people, reminding them that the strength of His love is able to overcome all obstacles, and that His love endures forever. In the same way that Adonai carefully preserved Noah and His family through the devastation of the flood, so Israel is secure in the “ark” of God’s love and faithfulness.

The same is true for all who constitute the remnant of Israel through faith in God’s Messiah.

We may rest assured that God's love will never fail us, and that our eternal souls are secure in His grace.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing,
will be able to separate us from the love of God,
which is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.

(Rom 8:38–39)