

THE FALL, FLOOD, AND DISPERSION OF THE NATIONS

GENESIS 3-11

The Fall (3-5)

Though humans were created as true lords over paradise, they fell from this honored status by actively choosing to disobey God. In the account of human origins, the basic problem of the human race is not ignorance, but rebellion. The full story of the fall carries the reader to the time of Noah's flood, and it is a story of jealousy, fratricide, polygamy, exploitation, vengeance, and rampant depravity (3:1-7; 4:4-8, 19, 23-24; 6:5). Centuries later, St. Paul would describe this as "sin entering the world" (Ro. 5:12).

God had placed the man and woman in an idyllic garden in which all the fruit was available to them except one, the tree whose fruit brought death. To these humans God had given limited freedom (2:16-17), and out of this freedom they chose to disobey him. No information is given as to why the snake in the garden was already set against God (though much later in the Bible there are hints about it), but this shrewd creature confronted the woman and the man, creating doubt about God's instructions. Though the man and woman were together (3:6b), the snake spoke only to the woman. Perhaps he considered her more vulnerable, since the original prohibition was given to the man before she was created (cf. 2:17). In any case, she became confused, as is evident by her misquoting the words of the prohibition (3:3). The snake suggested to her that God was withholding from her something desirable (3:4-5). When she touched the forbidden fruit, nothing immediately happened, and so she also ate it (3:6a). She gave the fruit to the man, who all this time had not raised a single word of protest, and he ate it, too (3:6b). Suddenly, the significance of their rebellion burst upon them, and they were ashamed (3:7). Now both were vulnerable, unable to trust even each other.

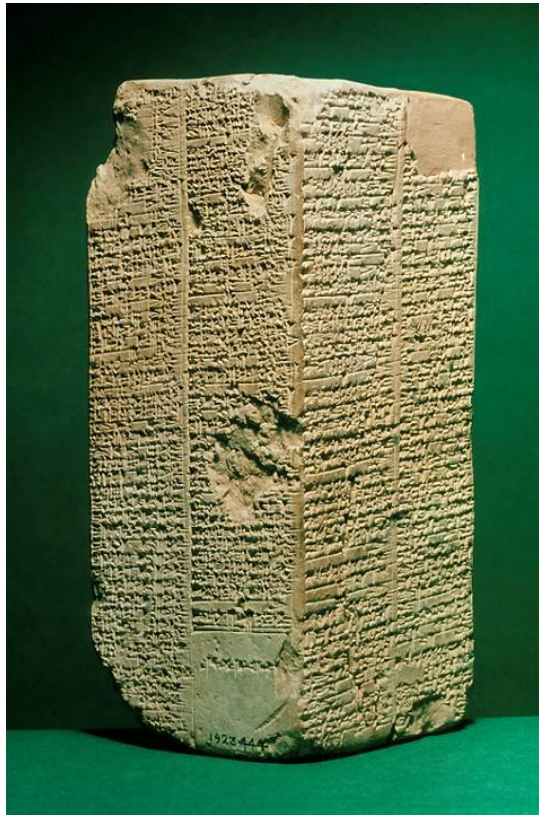
Responsibility calls for accountability, and God confronted the man and the woman about their rebellion (3:8-11). The man blamed the woman (3:12), and the woman blamed the snake (3:13).



Michelangelo's famous fresco in the Sistine Chapel in Rome depicts the fall and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden.

TORAH SURVEY

Both, however, were equally culpable, as is apparent from the judgments that were meted out. The snake was promised that the offspring of the woman would crush his head (3:17), the first glimmer of the coming of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9-11). The woman was now susceptible to increased difficulty in childbirth, not to mention exploitation by men (3:16). The man would continue to work, but now his work would be frustrated with alien elements (3:17-19a). Most important, death had entered the human family (3:19b). So, the man and woman were driven from the garden and prevented from returning (3:22-24).



The Sumerian King List (near the end of the 3rd millennium BC) lists rulers who lived “until the time of the great flood” as well as afterwards. These early kings are described as having extremely long life-spans (some as long as 64,800 years).

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Depravity continued to spread throughout all the members of the human family. It moved from fratricide (4:3-8) to exploitation by polygamy (4:19) to uncontrolled revenge (4:23-24). Alongside this depravity, however, there were also impressive qualities within the humans. They developed skills in farming, music, and metallurgy (4:20-22). Some even began to seek after God (4:26). Notable among them was a man called Enoch, who found an intimate relationship with God (5:22-24). In the same family line as Enoch, a man was born named Noah, a name which is a play on words with the Hebrew word for comfort. This name suggests that humans sought relief from the difficulty of surviving in a world that had now become cursed due to their sin (5:29). The noted Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) well stated, “The Fall is the silent hypothesis of the whole Biblical doctrine of sin and redemption.” East of Eden becomes a symbolic direction for wandering away from God (3:24; 4:16; 11:2).¹

The Great Flood (6-9)

If a few humans sought after God (4:26; 5:24), such a pursuit was not generally characteristic of the race. Rather, human wickedness became rampant, epitomized in a race of tyrants (6:4).² God determined to destroy the humans, because their immoral behavior grieved him deeply (6:5-7). Still, he extended to them 120 years of grace to give them time to avert judgment (6:3).

¹ There remain, of course, a number of perplexing issues about which Christians have long speculated, such as, the attempts to date the creation, questions about the process of creation, the question as to where Cain got his wife, the extreme ages of the antediluvians, and so forth, none of which I’ve addressed. Still, as fascinating as these things are, they are peripheral to the main story and must not be allowed to displace it.

² Two lines of interpretation address the union of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” with the resulting *Nephilim*. One is that this was a union of fallen angels and humans resulting in giants. The other is that the family line of the Sethites mixed with the family line of the Cainites resulting in oppressive leaders.

TORAH SURVEY

When there was no lessening of human depravity (6:11-12), God commissioned Noah to build a huge boat by which to save his family from the coming judgment (6:13-22). In this boat, eight humans as well as pairs of the various animals of the earth survived a devastating flood that lasted some 371 days (7:11--8:14).³ When Noah emerged from the ark, he offered sacrifices of worship to God (8:18-20). God promised never again to destroy the human race in this fashion, even though he knew that humans would continue to abuse their freedom and descend into further moral decline (8:21-22). He made a covenant (binding agreement) with Noah which began the structures of law and order out of anarchy and chaos (9:3-6). Unlimited vengeance was prohibited (9:6). God gave a sign in the rainbow that his covenantal promise would not fail (9:8-17). The sons of Noah would now become the heads of the various human families on the earth (9:1, 7, 18-19). However, among these families would develop a particular tension, especially between the descendants of Shem and the family of Ham (9:24-27). This tension would eventually reach crisis proportions between the nation Israel, from the family line of Shem, and the nations of the Canaanites, from the family line of Ham.



Tablet 11 of a larger 12 tablet epic describes the flood hero, Utnapishtim, who built a boat, survived the flood, released a dove, released a swallow, and then a raven. He left the boat, offered sacrifices, and was granted eternal life.

British Museum, London

As with the creation story, a number of flood traditions have survived from the ancient Near East, the most well-known being the *Gilgamesh Epic*, a Mesopotamian flood account preserved in cuneiform. While there are many points of similarity with the Genesis flood (e.g., a hero, a boat, preservation of animals, rain, flood, and the release of birds), there also are striking differences. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the story is thoroughly polytheistic, and the gods destroyed humans because they made too much noise. In the biblical account, God decides to send judgment on the human race for its violence and immorality. While the similarities suggest a common origin, the differences show that the God of the Bible is holy and his judgments are “true and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9). Whereas in the Mesopotamian versions the gods are characterized by cruelty, irritation, and anger, leading them to destroy humans because they were too bothersome and over-crowded, in the biblical story God is characterized by moral grief over human sin. Like the creation account in Genesis, the account of Noah's flood is a

correction to the popular views from Mesopotamia, a correction that would be especially important as the Israelites moved northward and eastward from Egypt toward the land of Canaan.

³ There has been much scholarly discussion as to whether or not the story intends to describe a global flood or an intense local flood. Traditionally, a global flood has been assumed, but the biblical language is not precise and the logistical difficulties of a global flood are so overwhelming that a more limited flood has been proposed.

The Dispersion of the Nations

As in the creation story, there are two accounts of the dispersion of the nations. The first is more general, while the second focuses upon the cause of the dispersion. The various branches of the human family headed by Noah's sons spread throughout the ancient world after the great flood (10:5, 20, 31). While some of the tribal names are difficult to identify, there is general agreement that the families descending from Japheth migrated toward the Mediterranean and Europe, while the families descending from Shem and Ham spread throughout the Middle East and northeast Africa. In the Table of Nations, Nimrod (= a name meaning "we shall rebel"), the founder of Babylon and other cities, is singled out for special attention in that he was a champion hunter (10:8-9). It is in the second account of the dispersion that the reason for this attention is provided.

Babel, the city of Nimrod, was the site where the dispersion actually originated (11:9). At the time, the descendants of Noah were all of the same language, and they settled in Shinar, better known as Babylonia (11:1-2). Though God's command was that they fill the earth (9:1), in Babylonia they organized themselves to



This, the oldest Sumerian ziggurat constructed by King Ur-Nammu of Ur (2112-2095 BC), was constructed to celebrate his founding of a new dynasty and was dedicated to the moon god Nannar.

build a ziggurat into the heavens, a form of self-designed worship that implicitly sought to displace God (11:3-4). Consequently, God confused their language so that they were compelled to scatter throughout the earth in their various language groups (11:5-9; cf. 10:5, 20, 31).

After this dispersion, the family line of Shem continued until the time of Terah, the father of Abram, whom the reader finds in Ur of Mesopotamia (11:26-28). Terah and his son Abram migrated up the Mesopotamia valley as far as Haran, a city in northwest Mesopotamia.

In the foregoing history, the biblical account demonstrates that God was not a provincial deity. Rather, he was the Creator of the whole universe; he was the sovereign Lord over all humankind. The depravity of the human race and its deserved judgment become repeating patterns in the fall of Adam and Eve (3), the curse of Cain (4), the flood of Noah (6-9), and the confusion at Babel (11). If the human race was to be reconciled to its Creator, God must himself take the initiative to set it right. Humans could not right themselves. To be sure, there were a few persons who sought after God, such as, Seth, Enoch, and Noah. Such people were striking exceptions, however. The overwhelming trend was toward rebellion and violence (6:5; 9:21b). The earth was saturated with discord: husband against wife, son against father, son against son, people against creation, nation against nation, and all against God. The primeval history concludes by depicting a world deeply alienated from its Creator, a twisted world crying out for salvation.