

**Darren Aronofsky's Noah:  
from "Hope in Heaven" to "Hope in Grandchildren"**

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*You know the city Shurruk, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? that city grew old and the gods that were in it were old.... In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, "The uproar of humankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel." So the gods agreed to exterminate humanity. Enlil did that, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream.... "Tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down our house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her. Let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss; then take up into the board the seed of all living creatures...." On the seventh day the boat was complete.... I loaded onto her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kind, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the [artisans]..... One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle. One could not see one's own brother or sister nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven.... For six day and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world.... When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled...on the mountain of Nisir the board held fast, she held fast and did not budge.... When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the water had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation on the mountain top.*

—[The Epic of Gilgamesh](#)

Many interrelated flood stories circulated around the ancient world from "Manu's Great Deluge" in India to the *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Sumeria. Scholars date the Gilgamesh texts to around 1,700 B.C.E., preceding the biblical flood story in Genesis by as much as a thousand years. And the many similarities between those two flood accounts support the theory that the **biblical version derives from the Gilgamesh story.**

Setting aside the *Gilgamesh* flood story, a close reading of Genesis shows that **the Bible itself preserves two different versions of the flood myth:** one from the Northern Kingdom of

Israel and another from Southern Kingdom of Judah. To somewhat oversimplify, the first five books of the Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy — were likely edited together from four earlier sources that scholars retrospectively called J, E, P, and D (the Jahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and the Deuteronomist). And **one of the biggest clues for “unstitching” the sources are whether God is called *Yahweh* (the preference of the “J Source”) or *Elohim* (the preference of the “E Source”).** For example, if you separate out the E and P strands, they hold that the divine name of “Yahweh” was not revealed until well into the Book of Exodus (the second book of the Bible), when Moses encounters the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai. In contrast, the J Source calls God “Yahweh” in Genesis 2, and says explicitly in Genesis 4:26 that, “At that time people began to invoke the name of the YHWH.”

We see similar major differences in the two flood stories. According to “The Book of J,” Noah takes *seven* pairs of each animal (Genesis 7:2), whereas in the P Source, Noah is told to take only “*two* of every kind...male and female” (Genesis 6:19-20). This discrepancy is particularly important *after* the flood. According to J, “Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Genesis 8:20). Since, according to the J Source, Noah has *seven* pairs of each animal, sacrificing one of every animal is not a problem because there are at least six more pairs in reserve.

**But for the P Source in which only *one* pair of each animals was taken into the ark, sacrificing one of every clean animal would have resulted in mass extinction.** But there is no such problem for the P Source, which holds that *no* ritual sacrifices happened until the Tabernacle is built, almost at the end of Exodus. Moreover, for the P (“Priestly”) source, *only sons of Aaron* can make proper ritual sacrifices of “clean” animals, and Noah predates Aaron.<sup>1</sup>

Let me also quickly mention a few other differences that help distinguish the two different flood stories in Genesis: **different animals released as the flood recedes, different lengths of the flood, and different human life expectancies:**

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<sup>1</sup> “*the P Source, which holds that no ritual sacrifices happened until the Tabernacle is built*” — for more see Robert S. Kawashima, “Sources and Redaction” in [Reading Genesis: Ten Methods](#), edited by Ronald Hendel, 66-69.

- Similar to one of the animals used in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the P Source says that Noah released a *raven one-time* to determine when the waters had lowered enough to exposed dry land, but J tells us that Noah sent out a *dove three times* (Genesis 8).
- The J Source tells us that the flood lasted “*forty days*” (Genesis 7), whereas P tells us one chapter later that the flood lasted a *year and ten days*.
- And according to The Book of J, God says definitively that, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years” (Genesis 6:3). And consistently in the J Source, humans do not live any longer than 120 years, whereas other places early in Genesis depict humans living for centuries. Most famously, Methuselah is said to have lived almost 1,000 years (Genesis 5:27).

The editors of the anthology of books that came to be called the Bible kept both versions. And were perhaps more tolerant in of ambiguity, contradiction, and plurality than some modern proponents of the Bible.

If you are interested in learning more about these earlier sources behind the Hebrew Bible, a helpful starting point is two books by Richard Elliott Friedman (1946- ), a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia: his popular historical survey **Who Wrote the Bible?** and **The Bible with Sources Revealed**, which uses “different colors and type styles....to easily identify each of the distinct sources.”

As many of you know I’m currently teaching a class at Frederick Community College on “Banned Questions about the Bible,” which is mostly about surveying some of the questions scholars have been asking for more than century, but that do not always make their way from the academy to the local congregation. This **discrepancy between how the Bible is taught in colleges versus congregations** is one of the reasons that I was eager to see what Darren Aronofsky — a Jewish kid from Brooklyn and the director of films known for being equal parts fascinating and disturbing such as *Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, and *Black Swan* — to see what he could do with the Bible in one hand and \$130 million in the other hand.

And although I think the film (though strong in parts) ultimately falls short in significant ways, **Aronofsky does fascinatingly translate scripture into screenplay using a very Jewish method of interpretation called *midrash***, which fills in the gaps of the biblical text with

elaborate details and speculation about what might have been the case. Many critics of Aronofsky's *Noah* forget that Cecil B. DeMille took similar artistic license in bringing the Exodus story to the silver screen in his 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*.

But what's even more frustrating about some of the criticism of *Noah* is those who complain that Aronofsky completely made up the Transformer-like rock creatures called "The Watchers." Aronofsky did take significant midrashic, artistic license in giving these creatures a huge role in his film, but **these odd creatures — or something like them — are explicitly in the Bible.**

Often the story of Noah is told starting with Genesis 6:5:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." 8 But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord."

But Aronofsky, like any close readers of the biblical text, knows that the biblical story of the flood doesn't start five verses into Genesis 6. It starts even earlier than Genesis chapter 6, but for our purposes, to look even at just that four verses immediately before where excerpts of the Noah story typically begin, we read the strange account that

1 When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.... 4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

Those Bible verses sound like they easily could've been lifted from the many stories of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses disguising themselves and cavorting amongst humankind! And Aronofsky's Transformer-like rock monsters are his cinematic version of ancient midrashim that

explore the questions such as “What the heck are the Nephilim?!” Literally, the word means “Fallen Ones.” Beyond that, the rest is speculation.

Relatedly, if you hear anyone saying that they can’t believe that Aronofsky depicted Noah passed out drunk and naked after the flood, then feel free to direct them to the end of Genesis 9, which says, “*20* Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. *21* He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. *22* And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.” That’s what the Bible says, and that’s what Aronofsky filmed. This scene is, of course, **only one among many scenes of graphic nudity, sex, and violence that would lead any literally-shot biblical film to be rated NC-17.**

But one contemporary meaning of the Noah myth that Aronofsky arguably gets most right is the choice to make **Noah a co-conspirator in the most extreme form of eco-terrorism imaginable: destroying humanity, so that the Earth can heal itself.** And looking closely at the biblical text, this interpretation is not much of a stretch. Although Noah’s ark has come to be one of the most popular visual murals to paint on the walls of children’s nurseries — all those animals streaming in the ark are so cute! — the illustrators of all those pieces of children’s art seem to forget that the reason all those cuddly animals are streaming onto the ark is that God, according to the Bible, is in the process of committing mass murder on a level that far exceeds even genocide: the systematic elimination of the genes of a racial or ethnic group. **What the Noah myth describes is what can only be called borderline *speciocide*:** the systematic killing of every species on earth with the exception of one human family and one pair of each creature.

There are a few explanations that I can see for why those who tell the Noah story to children and paint it on the walls of nurseries do not see that choice as problematic. First, the animals *are* cute. Second, there is a strong theological tradition that the wicked deserve to be punished; therefore, not only is God right to kill all the wicked ones with the exception of the righteous Noah, but also that the story serves as a cautionary tale to warn children that if they are wicked then God will smite them. (I’m not recommending this parenting strategy, but it is out there. Indeed, we still see this sort of perverse theology from commentators such as the Jerry Falwell and the late Fred Phelps.) Third, there is a strong theme, especially in the J Source, that

all the capricious, cruel acts of God need no more justification than to say that God is God and we are not. (We, of course, see Greek and Roman gods — as well as Hindu gods and other places in world mythology — acting in unpredictable, cruel, even monstrous ways.)

Now, you've heard me say before that the invitation in our postmodern world is not to take these ancient myths *literally* as about some historical story that happened one time a long time ago, but instead to **look for the ways that these ancient myths speak to the universal human condition**. In this case, we have an ancient flood story found in many different cultures that can be seen as **inviting us to see *archetypally* that humans are responsible for how we treat one another and how we treat this earth**.

And **many scientists have taken to calling our geologic epoch the Anthropocene to indicate the effect that we humans are having on this planet**. Human activities as well as the resulting animal extinctions are leaving what scientists call a “biostratigraphical signal” that will still be identifiable millions of years from now — if there is an intelligent life remaining to notice:

- Human activity has transform between a third and a half of the land surface of the planet.
- Most of the world's major rivers have been dammed or diverted.
- Fertilizer plants produce more nitrogen than is fixed naturally by all terrestrial ecosystems.
- Fisheries remove more than a third of the primary production of the ocean's coastal waters.
- Humans use more than half of the world's readily accessible fresh water runoff.<sup>2</sup>

Modern science also has its own word for what Genesis calls “blotting out from the earth the human beings...together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air.” Modern science calls that level of blotting out “Mass Extinction.” Keep in mind, though, that we didn't

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<sup>2</sup> On the Anthropocene epoch and bulleted data, see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* 108-109.

know any species ever became extinct until fossil discoveries in the 1700s.<sup>3</sup> But since then we have come to learn that:

there “have been **five great mass extinctions during the history of life on this planet**”.... The first took place...some 450 million years ago, when living things were still mainly confined to the water. The most devastating took place at the end of the Permian period, some 250 million years ago, and it came perilously close to emptying the earth out altogether.... The most recent — and famous — mass extinction came at the close of the Cretaceous period; it wiped out, in addition to the dinosaurs, the plesiosaurs, the mosasaurs, the ammonites, and the pterosaurs.<sup>4</sup>

The history of these five mass extinctions and our current precarious situation are explored in Elizabeth Kolbert’s new book, *The Sixth Extinction*, which investigates the case that we may well be at the beginnings of a new potential mass extinction on this planet.

Just last week the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations group, reported that beginnings of a global catastrophe of Noah’s Flood-like proportions. In the summary of the report in *The New York Times*:

**Climate change is already having sweeping effects on every continent and throughout the world’s oceans**.... ice caps are melting, sea ice in the Arctic is collapsing, water supplies are coming under stress, heat waves and heavy rains are intensifying, coral reefs are dying, and fish and many other creatures are migrating toward the poles or in some cases going extinct. The oceans are rising at a pace that threatens coastal communities....

Slowing the rate of climate change is far beyond the capacity of one sermon, but allow me at least to point to some resources within our Unitarian Universalist tradition that can help.

One is a **respect for science**, which leads us as a religious community to take the warnings about climate change seriously. In so doing, we join with other religious progressives, who seek to show that you don’t have to check your brain at the sanctuary door — and that it is

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<sup>3</sup> “*didn’t know any species ever became extinct until fossil discoveries in the 1700s*” — Kolbert, 93-4.

<sup>4</sup> “*five great mass extinctions during the history of life on this planet*” —Kolbert, 6

possible to draw from both the best of modern science as well as the best of world's religious traditions.

A second resource is our Seventh Principle, "The interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." More than 150 years ago, Darwin showed us that we humans are *not* a little lower than the angels; we are just a little higher than the apes. And when we forget that we are merely one part of an interdependent web, we forget, in the words of one bumper sticker, that, **"In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches."**<sup>5</sup>

A third resource is the Universalist half of our heritage, which began as a rejection of the idea of hell a next world, and expanded into a *universal* concern for all people in *this world*. The sacrifices and lifestyle changes that will be necessary to slow the speed of climate change will be significant, but our Universalist heritage gives us hope that shift is possible. In the words of the late philosopher Richard Rorty, "As it [turns] out, **willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one's hopes for paradise to one's hopes for one's grandchildren.**"<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of the worldwide flood myth both then and now is at least threefold:

- (1) human actions have consequences,
- (2) all living beings on this planet have been almost eradicated in the past five times, and mass extinction will almost inevitably happen again, but we should do all we can to slow the extinction rate,
- (3) **when global climate catastrophe does come — just as in the Noah story — there will be no divine intervention to save us.**

To again quote Rorty:

to say that we are clever animals is not to say something philosophical and pessimistic but something political and hopeful – namely, **if we can work together, we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous**

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<sup>5</sup> "*humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches.*" — Kolbert, 268.

<sup>6</sup> "*willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable*" —Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 85



**enough to imagine ourselves becoming.** This is to set aside [questions such as] ‘What is man?’ and to substitute the question ‘What sort of world can we prepare for our great grandchildren?’<sup>7</sup>

That question echoes the American Indian wisdom that the ideology of industrialization and manifest destiny refused to take seriously and in so doing created the climate crisis that we now face. May we finally learn now at this late hour to take seriously that wisdom to account not only for how our actions affect ourselves, but also how our actions will affect the world into which children seven generations from now will be born. How are we called to live differently to help ensure a life-giving world and society even unto the “seventh generation?”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “*to say that we are clever animals*” — The Rorty Reader, 357-358.

<sup>8</sup> “*How will this affect the seventh generation*” — this perspective has been particularly identified with the Iroquois Nation. For more, see “An Iroquois Perspective” in [American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History](#), edited by Christopher Vecsey and Robert Venables, 173-174.