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The Genesis Flood and the Nuclear Holocaust: A Hermeneutical Reflection

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The failure of much modern Evangelical hermeneutics lies in its inability to relate the Bible adequately to the novel features of the contemporary world, which the Bible does not directly address. All too often Evangelicals who try to see the world in a biblical perspective end up forcing the modern world onto the Procrustean bed of the biblical world (i.e. the world within which and to which the Bible was originally written). Genuinely novel features of the modern world are either reduced to some feature of the biblical world, so that their novelty is not really admitted, or else they are not seen as really important features of the modern world, so that their novelty can be admitted but trivialized. That the modern world is significantly shaped by radically novel features, which the authors of Scripture did not envisage, seems hard to admit because the Bible's ability to speak relevantly to the contemporary world would seem to be to that extent reduced.

We need to develop a hermeneutic which bridges the gap between the original contexts of Scripture and our contemporary context not only by way of similarities but also by way of contrasts, so that these very contrasts can be a means by which the Bible illuminates the theological significance of our contemporary world. In this article I attempt to show how this can be done in relation to one modern issue whose real novelty Evangelicals seem often to find hard to grasp: the nuclear issue. Of various parts or themes of the Bible which could be related to this issue, I have chosen the Flood narrative (Genesis 6–9), partly because I have not seen this relationship explored in any detail elsewhere. I am not here concerned with the narrowly ethical questions which nuclear weapons raise, vitally important though they are, so much as with a broader theological understanding of the situation of the nuclear threat.

1. The Flood

For our purposes, we may leave aside the difficult question of the historical origin of the biblical Flood story.¹ Whether, as even von Rad supposed,² it and the many similar stories around the world preserve a primeval memory of a cataclysmic event which all but destroyed humanity in prehistoric times, or whether the story

originated only in one or more local disasters³ projected onto a universal scale, is not important. It is not important because the message of the story is not so much that God once brought a universal deluge on the earth, but rather that he will never do so again.⁴

The Flood stories of the world, whatever their origins, reflect early humanity's awareness of the fragility of the conditions which make human life on earth possible. Vast forces of nature, capable of catastrophic destruction, threatened human survival. There was nothing about the natural world itself which guaranteed the continuance of human life within it. In the idiom of the Genesis account, the waters of chaos, which God in creation divided and held back (Gen. 1:6-7) in order to create a space in which living creatures could live, were not abolished but only restrained. 'Chaos remains at the edge of creation, so to speak, as a threatening possibility.'⁵ Only God's maintenance of the order of creation prevented the incursion of these forces of destruction. The Flood narrative makes this point graphically by recounting the one occasion on which God released the waters of chaos, from above and below the earth (Gen. 7:11), so that they were reunited and once more submerged the earth, virtually undoing creation, destroying the works of the fifth and sixth days (Gen. 7:21-23). But the story of the Flood reaches its goal in God's pledge that this will never happen again (Gen. 8:21-22; 9:8-17). 'While the earth remains' God guarantees the stability of the natural conditions on which the continuance of human and animal life depends (8:22). Never again will there be natural catastrophe on such a scale as to threaten the very survival of the human race (8:21; 9:11).

Thus the initial hermeneutical key to the Flood story is to appreciate how it speaks to early humanity's awareness of the threat to human life from the uncontrollable, chaotic forces of the universe. As such it complements the account of creation. The Creator, who established the conditions of human and animal life in the beginning, could, as the story of the Flood shows, revoke what he has created, but he has in fact pledged himself never again to do so. Early hearers of the story knew that the natural conditions for human survival could not be taken for granted, as though there were any inherent necessity about them, but were contingent on God's will. But they were also able to trust the Creator's promise, symbolized by the rainbow, that he would protect and maintain his creation. His creative will, his commitment to his creation, was dependable.

An existential sense of human survival as threatened by overwhelming catastrophe must have been most alive very early in human history, and must have been already receding in Old Testament times. For much of historical time the survival of humanity has not

been a matter for reflection, outside the special case of the apocalyptic tradition, which has its own rather significant links with the Flood story.⁶ Political developments made the survival of one's people or nation the overwhelming preoccupation, beyond which the survival of the race as such was neither really in question nor of any independent interest. (Only in recent history has a novel and remarkable tension and alignment between a threat to national survival and a threat to human survival appeared in the form of the nuclear threat.) Moreover, in modern history until recently, fear of the uncontrollable, destructive forces of nature has steadily given way to a sense of human control over the environment and conditions of human life. 'Consequently,' as Claus Westermann comments, 'while creation was always an important part of the teaching of the church, the flood had no significance at all and for all the practical purposes disappeared completely from the proclamation.'⁷ Of course, the Flood story could have been used to remind people of the contingency of human survival, but in fact it has rarely been so used because it no longer, in the recent historical past, corresponded to any living apprehension about human survival. But Westermann's further observation suggests that this may be changing: 'It is possible that in a future which will be even more aware than the present of dangers and threats to humanity as a whole, the narrative of the flood will be heard anew.'⁸

Before taking up this possibility, we must notice some other features of the Genesis narrative. It is a story not just about universal destruction, but about universal judgment. The Flood had its origin in God's grief at what his human creation had come to, such that he regretted their creation (Gen. 6:6-7). The sense of these verses is that God's decision to destroy his own creation was a painful one, a decision more in grief than in anger,⁹ but a decision made because the earth was no longer as God created it. 'God saw the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt' (6:12) stands in deliberate contrast with 1:31: 'God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.' His creation is no longer good because human beings have 'corrupted' or 'destroyed' it: hence he will 'destroy them with the earth' (6:13: the same word is rendered 'corrupt' and 'destroy' in 6:11, 12, 13, 17 RSV).

Specifically, it is with 'violence' that human beings have corrupted the earth (6:11, 13). The development of human civilization is described in Genesis 4 in such a way as to highlight this theme of violence. Though the origins of civilization in Cain's city and the inventions of the sons of Lamech (4:17, 20-22) are not condemned, they are framed by a context of escalating violence which gives the achievements of human civilization a deep ambiguity. Cain, the murderer of his brother, began the disruption of all human brotherhood by violence, but to forestall the escalation of violence

God protected him from blood-vengeance, pronouncing sevenfold vengeance on any who should slay Cain (4:14–15). Cain's descendant Lamech, however, broke clean through these divine limitations on violence, bragging to his wives of his power to inflict unlimited revenge (4:23–24). Lamech's song not only follows from the technological inventions of his son (4:22), who doubtless forged swords as well as ploughshares, but also sums up the story of civilization in 4:17–22. 'The Cain and Abel narrative says that when people created by God live side-by-side in brotherhood there is at the same time the possibility of killing. The song of Lamech indicates that the increased progress activated by the human potential increases the possibility of mutual destruction. With the growth of one's capacities there is a growth of self-assertion and amour-propre that demands retribution without limit for even the smallest injury.'¹¹

The real significance of the Flood as God's judgment on human corruption of the earth through violence emerges, once again, in God's pledge that such a judgment will not happen again. The preservation of Noah and his family made possible a kind of fresh start to creation after the Flood, but this was not a new creation from which the causes of the human sin which had led to the Flood were eliminated. Although in the New Testament the salvation of Noah became a kind of type of Christian salvation (1 Peter 3:20–21), it could be no more than a type, because the Flood eliminated only sinners, not sin. Hence God after the Flood (Gen. 8:21) observes that the inclination of the human heart is evil, just as he had done before the Flood (6:5), but whereas before the Flood this was the ground for destroying humanity, after the Flood it is a situation which God tolerates. *In spite of human evil, God resolves never again to destroy humanity (8:21). This, 'just because the world now stands under the divine mercy, the Flood is unrepeatable. It is not that the reason for the Flood no longer exists, as if the wickedness of the generation of the Flood was greater than that of any subsequent generation. Mankind after the Flood is not different ... In spite of human sin and violence, God has committed himself to his world.'*¹² In this perspective, the strictly unilateral character of the so-called 'Noahic covenant' (Gen. 9:8–17) is important. No human conditions attach to it. God's pledge to hold back the waters of chaos from now on is unconditional grace.

Thus the Flood narrative reveals that the survival of the human race is not only contingent on the divine will as such, but dependent on the divine mercy and patience.¹³ What has been in principle forfeited again and again by sin, is continually given by God's grace in faithfulness to his pledge to Noah. It is against this background of universal mercy that the biblical story of God's purpose for universal redemption unfolds.

So far we have considered the Flood as a story about human survival, but it is also, very prominently, a story about animal survival. The two are bound up together, in that 'humans and the animals stand together in face of the catastrophes that threatens life'.¹⁴ Contrary to the way it has sometimes been interpreted, Genesis does not represent the animals as created for the sake of humanity, but it does place them under the responsible and benevolent authority of humanity, to whom, as the dominant species on earth, God has delegated a measure of his own authority on earth (Gen. 1:26, 28).¹⁵ Of all biblical characters it is Noah, in his 'conservationist' role, who best exemplifies the true meaning of this human 'dominion', as exercised in imitation of God's care for his creation. Although Gen. 9:2-5 does give human survival a certain priority over animal survival, even here it is clear that animal life has its own value in the sight of God, which may not be disregarded even in such killing of animals as God permits (9:4). But even more strikingly the terms of the Noahic covenant constitute a rebuke to the human tendency to see the world in more anthropocentric terms than God does. All the animals are explicitly its beneficiaries alongside Noah and his descendents (9:10, 12, 15, 16). God is concerned for and pledges himself to the survival of the animal creation as well as humanity.¹⁶

Finally, we should notice that the renewal of the creation mandate to humanity in 9:1-7 not only indicates a kind of fresh start to creation after the Flood, reestablishing God's creative will for humanity on earth and in relation to the animals, but also expresses this creative will in terms conditioned by the violence which is now a feature of human life. Since God now pledges himself to the survival of human and animal life in spite of this violence, the creation mandate is reformulated to take account of it. Violence must be contained so that it does not endanger human survival. A limited degree of violence now enters the notion of human dominion over the animals (9:2-5), but only in the interests of human survival. Similarly, the violence of man against man is to be restrained by God's permission for limited retaliation (9:6), so that murder shall not lead to the unlimited violence of the bloodfeud, which always in ancient society threatened to go on for ever. Thus God now permits such limited violence as will enable humanity to multiply and populate the earth (9:1, 7) in the face of both animal and internecine violence. With biblical hindsight, of course, we can recognize in this a kind of holding operation, with a view to God's redemptive strategy for the transformation of human hearts. Unlike the unconditional grace of the Noahic covenant, however, it is a holding operation which God entrusts to humanity to carry out. There is no guarantee that it will work for ever.

2. The Nuclear Holocaust

In very recent times the sense that the actual survival of the human race on earth is threatened has begun to become once again part of general awareness of the human condition. But it has emerged in a form significantly different from the ancient form to which the story of the Flood originally spoke. Whereas in ancient times it reflected humanity's vulnerability to the uncontrollable, destructive forces of nature, in modern times it reflects humanity's unprecedented control over the forces of nature.

Scientific and technological progress have placed modern humanity in a very different relationship to the natural world and the animal creation from that which is presupposed in Genesis 9. We no longer live largely within the given conditions of the natural world, but control and direct the forces of nature, and are continually adapting the natural world to make it a more favourable environment for human life. Even though we are still vulnerable to natural catastrophes, increasingly we are even able to reduce the disastrous effects of these, while such shattering phenomena as famine in Africa are in fact predictable and preventable, so that they no longer reflect human helplessness before the forces of nature but rather human selfishness, negligence and greed. However, the deep ambiguity of human civilization, as already perceived in its origins in Genesis 4, has become more and more apparent in the results of modern technological advance. The same process which has relieved so much human suffering has also made possible the sickening cruelties of twentieth-century wars and tyrannies. The ecological crisis has revealed how the same mastery over nature which has adapted nature for our benefit and freed us, to some extent, from dependence on uncontrollable factors in the natural world, has come at the same time to threaten the natural conditions on which our survival depends. By taking into our own hands the management of the conditions of human life on earth, we have taken on the responsibility for maintaining or destroying them.

The terrifying ambiguity of modern humanity's mastery of nature becomes nowhere so obvious as in the nuclear bomb. We can now do what the Flood did. What in Noah's day only the forces of nature under the sole control of God could do, human beings can now do. We can let loose the forces of chaos and undo God's creation. Whereas before the Flood human violence 'destroyed' the earth in the sense of 'corrupting' it (Gen. 6:11-12), human violence now threatens to destroy the earth in the sense in which God destroyed it in the Flood (Gen. 6:13, 17). The threat to the survival of the human race now comes directly from ourselves. As Jonathan Schell says, by inventing the capacity for self-extinction as a species, human beings 'have caused a basic change in the circumstances in which life was given us, which is to say that we have altered the human condition.'¹⁷

No-one, of course, can be entirely sure what the effects of the use of nuclear weapons on a significant scale would be. In particular, it is not clear how far the southern hemisphere might escape the devastating effects of a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere. But when full account is taken not simply of the immediate devastation caused by the nuclear explosions and radiation, but also of the large-scale atmospheric effects of the 'nuclear winter' and long term environmental effects, including irreparable damage to the ozone layer, it is clear that any sizable exchange of nuclear weapons could constitute a real threat to human survival. Not every possible nuclear war would terminate human history, but that it is now within human capacity to render the planet no longer habitable for human beings, or indeed for most other forms of life, cannot be doubted.⁸

The radical novelty of this threat of human *self*-destruction is such that the Bible does not envisage it. (The Bible's apocalyptic scenario of world destruction is no more a case of human *self*-destruction than is the Flood.) So at this point we must avoid the Evangelical hermeneutical temptation of emphasizing similarities at the expense of the differences between situations addressed in the Bible and contemporary situations. This is cheap relevance. It seeks to make the Bible seem relevant to modern people, but does so by distorting its actual message. The Bible's real relevance to contemporary people can be perceived only by fully recognizing the extent to which we find ourselves in circumstances different from those it directly addresses. Just as a moment's thought will make it clear why Hagar cannot be a biblical precedent for so-called surrogate motherhood, as currently practised, so it should already be clear that the nuclear holocaust would not be another Flood. But on the other hand, careful attention to the contrasting parallelism between the Flood and the nuclear holocaust can help us to put the nuclear threat in a biblical perspective.

In the first place, we should be clear that the Noahic covenant does not cover the threat of nuclear holocaust, in the sense of providing a divine guarantee that the holocaust will not happen. God's pledge not to destroy the earth is not a promise to prevent human beings from doing so; the possibility that they could had not entered the horizon of Genesis 9.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Noahic covenant is relevant to the nuclear situation, in that it assures us of God's commitment to human survival on earth. This has important implications. It means, for example, that a nuclear policy which risks human extinction is not some kind of heroic choice of death in preference to surrender of freedom or principle, but a direct rejection of the value which God himself puts on his human creation. To risk human extinction in a policy of nuclear retaliation can certainly not appeal to the divine permission for retaliation (Gen. 9:6) which was designed for the quite contrary purpose of protecting human survival against the threat of

escalating violence. Moreover, any attempted justification of nuclear retaliation which points to the supposed wickedness of the enemy, is not only an ideological abuse of moral categories: it also knows nothing of the gracious God of the Noahic covenant, who tolerates sin and withholds judgment because he is committed to the survival of his human creation in spite of its wickedness.

God's own commitment to human survival should form a kind of background to our Christian thinking about the nuclear issue and our Christian peacemaking activity. It does not mean that, in a situation in which human survival is, in a very important sense, in human hands, we can *presume* on God's providence to prevent the holocaust. In this situation, God's tolerance may, simply by leaving us to the consequences of our sin, become his judgment. In other words, God's commitment to human survival cannot relieve human beings of their own responsibility to ensure it. But it does assure those who work for peace that their efforts are in the direction of the divine purpose in history. Their responsible activity can be rooted in prayer to and trust in the God who is on their side because he is on the side of humanity as such.²⁰

It is in the light of the theological meaning of the Flood narrative that the full horror of nuclear weapons becomes apparent. They threaten to destroy God's creation which God himself, in spite of his grief at the extent to which it is already spoilt by human sin, has pledged himself to preserve. They threaten not only the human creation, created in God's image, but also the animal creation for which God has made humanity responsible and which he made Noah responsible for preserving even through the Flood. At a time when human dominance on earth already means the extinction of animal species at the rate of three a day, we have come a long way from the situation of primitive humanity when wild animals were a major threat to human survival (Gen. 9:2). It is a measure of our unbiblical anthropocentrism that the nuclear issue is regularly discussed as though only human beings would be affected.²¹ We have forgotten that human dignity, our creation in God's image, consists not in our liberty to disregard the rest of creation, but precisely in our exercise of responsible care for the rest of creation. Weapons which can reduce God's world to a smoking, poisonous waste, habitable only by insects, must be assessed in a theological context much broader than the ethics of the just war. 'More than human blood cries out to God.'²²

The nuclear threat expresses human rebellion against the creation mandate, both in its original form in Gen. 1:28 and in its reformulated form in Gen. 9:1-7. It threatens to destroy the creation for which God has made humanity responsible. It threatens to break all bounds of violence with a boast, like Lamech's, of unlimited retaliation, thereby both transgressing the limits and defeating the

purpose of the strictly limited violence permitted by Gen. 9:2–6. In seizing the godlike power to destroy God's creation, which God himself in the Noahic covenant pledged himself not to use, nuclear weapons express humanity's refusal to fulfil the divine image in imitation of God and determination instead to be gods in their own right. It is symbolically appropriate that in the nuclear winter no rainbows will be visible, since human beings will have taken it upon themselves to override God's creative will for the survival of his human and non-human creation.

Finally, I suggest that the Flood story can help us towards a kind of new quality of awareness of God and the world and ourselves, which the novelty and the gravity of the nuclear situation demand. To read the Flood narrative with sensitivity to its original import is to acquire a renewed sense of the world in which we live as God's gift to us. As we see its destruction withheld only by God's patience and mercy, we find the world we take for granted become once again the world continually granted to us by God's grace. With Noah we lose the world and find it again, finding it the more valuable in its newly experienced relationship to God. Serious confrontation with the nuclear threat can be the occasion for a similar experience of losing and finding. Contemplating what would be lost, we experience with fresh reality the goodness and beauty of the world which God has not yet allowed us to destroy, just as a person reprieved from terminal illness experiences the gratuitous joy of living with new intensity. And finding the world, so to speak, given back to us for the time being, we learn to share God's own commitment to its preservation. The relatively novel element in experiencing the world in the face of the nuclear threat, is that we find the world again both as God's gift *and* as our responsibility. In this way the experience becomes not some kind of religious escape from the urgent responsibilities of the nuclear age, but the source of a Christian perspective in which we can properly exercise those responsibilities.

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NOTES

- 1 I am deliberately treating the narrative of Genesis 6–9 as a whole in its final canonical form. Source-critical questions are valid but not relevant to my present purpose.
- 2 G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London, SCM Press 1972), pp.120–21.
- 3 Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (London, SPCK 1984), p.477.
- 4 G. Lambert, 'Il n'y aura plus jamais déluge (Genèse IX, 11)', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 87 (1955), pp.601, 720.

- 5 B.W. Anderson, 'Creation and Ecology', in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B.W. Anderson (Issues in Religion and Theology 6; Philadelphia, Fortress/London, SPCK 1984), p.158.
- 6 These links, and the understanding of the nuclear threat in relation to apocalyptic, would take us beyond the scope of this article, and must be left to another occasion.
- 7 Westermann, *op. cit.*, p.477.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Cf. *ibid.*, pp.410–11.
- 10 It is probably not correct to interpret 'all flesh' (6:12, 13) as including the animals as also held guilty of 'violence': see Westermann, *op. cit.*, p.416.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.337.
- 12 D. Clines, 'Noah's Flood: I: The Theology of the Flood Narrative', *Faith and Thought* 100 (1972–73), pp.139–40.
- 13 Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p.27.
- 14 Westermann, *op. cit.*, p.424.
- 15 See my article, 'First Steps to a Theology of Nature', forthcoming in *Evangelical Quarterly*.
- 16 On this aspect of the Flood story, see also W. Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco, Harper & Row 1984), ch.5.
- 17 J. Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (London, Pan Books 1982), p.115.
- 18 See, most recently, J. Schell, *The Abolition* (London, Pan Books 1984), pp.13–23.
- 19 In a sense it is true, as P. Selby ('Apocalyptic—Christian and Nuclear', *Modern Churchman* 26 [1984], p.9) says, that 'the covenant with Noah has been placed irrevocably now into our hands', though it should not be forgotten that other threats to human survival, over which we would have no control, are still quite conceivable.
- 20 For further discussion of divine providence and human freedom in the nuclear situation, see my article 'Theology after Hiroshima', forthcoming in *Scottish Journal of Theology*.
- 21 Once again, the humanist writer Jonathan Schell sees the implications of the nuclear threat more clearly than most Christians: 'The nuclear peril is usually seen in isolation from the threats to other forms of life and their ecosystems, but in fact it should be seen as the very centre of the ecological crisis' (*The Fate of the Earth*, p.111).
- 22 D. Aukermann, *Darkening Valley: A Biblical Perspective on Nuclear War* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p.127. On the topic of this paragraph, see the whole of Aukermann's excellent ch.18. See also Granberg-Michaelson, *op. cit.*, pp.175–77.