



Biblical Studies

Noah: The Basic Flaw in Human Impulses

Bereshith: The Matrix of Life in Covenant

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This portion, beginning with Bereshith Chapter 6, describes the beginning of the second epoch of human history, the epoch of Noah and his heirs. It begins by recounting the spread of wickedness on the earth, the Lord's disgust with that wickedness, and his plans to deal with it by destroying all living creatures except for Noah and his immediate family and an equivalent representation of each species. In all this recounting of human history, here and in the previous chapters, there is no reference whatsoever to the formal exercise of political authority. Rather, there is a sense of patriarchal rule within extended families on one hand, and anarchy beyond the extended family on the other, but this is only hinted at in the text.

God sees that the problem with man is his *yetzer* (impulse), as stated in 6:5, *yetzer mahshevet libo* (literally the impulse of his heart's thoughts). Here the Bible addresses itself to the psychological basis of the human condition, restating the classic philosophic problem; how could a good God create evil. The Bible only hints at the problem, namely that the qualities with which God found it necessary to endow humans for them to carry out their tasks included impulses that humans could not control. The political implications of this are extraordinarily important. Man is not naturally good but, as Freud put it, a bundle of impulses in desperate need of expert management. If God cannot control man's prior actions through what He has implanted within human beings, then any effort to establish a political framework for humanity must be based on this reality. Evil impulses must be recognized as inevitable and arrangements must be instituted for their management.

The problem is reflected in Noah's first action after leaving the ark and God's response. Noah takes one of the surviving creatures and sacrifices it to the Lord, whose response is extremely cryptic. On one hand, He is portrayed as smelling the sweet savor of the sacrifice and, as a result, promising not to curse the ground anymore because of human actions (Adam's punishment) nor again destroy the entire living world (the punishment of the generation of the flood). He explicitly reaffirms that the natural order will continue uninterrupted, both the seasons and the cycle of days. But He does so on the grounds that man's *yetzer* is irreparably evil from his youth. In other words, He seems to be rendering a judgment on the fact that the first thing that Noah could think to do was to kill living creatures in his effort to thank God. Here, too, the reference to evil inclination from one's youth implies that sexual maturity has some role to play in the matter, but the issue is not developed.

God must now revise His basic plan. He began with Adam as an innocent, placing man and woman in a near-perfect environment which would allow them scope for their faculties without requiring that they lose their innocence. However, those same faculties bring them to the loss of that innocence, so God tries hard work and pain as devices to control the newly knowledgeable race. But human ingenuity and inventiveness reduce the burdens of labor (through the human invention of technology) and pain (through the human invention of music) to tolerable levels so that people once again can turn to their evil ways. In both cases, those evil ways are somehow connected with vaguely illicit sexual activity.

God then decides to destroy life and start again with the best available candidate for the renewal of the human race only to find that the hereditary flaw built into the race persists. What follows (Chapter 9) is a discussion of God's third plan, His general covenant with mankind.

Before introducing the idea of covenant, the Bible introduces the concept of *hamas*, chaos-producing violence. In the Bible, comprehensive destruction is always a response to *hamas*. The one thing that can provoke God's virtually unlimited wrath is the sense of anarchy implied in the term, that is to say, the kind of chaos that utterly destroys all covenantal relationships and the rule of law. *Hamas* is an important socio-political concept in the Bible, explaining the fall of human civilizations and the polities which serve them.

Another vital biblical conception is introduced in Chapter 6, that of *derech* (way). In the biblical understanding, every creature has his own *derech* which either represents his biological heritage or, in the case of humans, the synthesis between their biological and cultural heritage. In the biblical world view, *derech* is a seminal or

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elementary concept which can be paired with that of *brit* (see v. 18). It is the biblical parallel to the Greek concept of nature, but unlike the latter, recognizes how impossible it is to separate nature and culture and is dynamic rather than static. Way or path denotes movement which, although to some extent fixed, also provides for change or development, not simply the filling out of a prefixed form. The reference here is to the fact that all flesh had corrupted their way, that is to say, the path common to all humans.

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