

“But Noah found favor in the sight of YHWH” (Genesis 6,8). The Biblical Noah in Context

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Within the Biblical narrative, the character of Noah stands between the era of an ideal world – evoked in both creation narratives (Genesis 1–3) – that will be destroyed because of the behaviour of its inhabitants, and a new era. Being the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah will be the founding father of that new world, in which God, for the first time, will make a ‘covenant’ with humanity. As such, Noah is “an epoch divider figure as well as a bridge between the quasi-mythological history and a more humanly accountable history”².

In the present contribution, I will concentrate first of all on the Biblical – i.e. Old Testament – text in which Noah plays the leading role. It is not my intention to present a detailed analysis of the text. Rather, I would like to point at some (theological) accents of the pericope. Secondly, I will deal with the Noah narrative against the background of the so-called *Babel-Bibel-Streit*. Finally, some elements from the most ancient Judeo-Christian reception history of the Noah narrative will be presented³.

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² I.M. Kikawada, *Noah and the Ark*, p. 1123. There is an immense amount of scholarly literature about the Noah narrative. Even if it is not the most recent one, Claus Westermann’s commentary on the book of Genesis remains an excellent tool for study of the pericope (C. Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 491-661).

³ Also in the Quran Noah plays an important role. See C.A. Segovia, *The Quranic Noah*.

I. Noah between pre-history and history

The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis cannot be read as an objective and scientific report of historical events. Although ‘story’ and ‘history’ are etymologically related, Genesis 1–11 is no reportage of historical facts. The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis tell ‘stories’, narratives, literary-theological texts that aim to proclaim, not to inform. As such, they contain mythical texts, dealing with Israel’s – and the world’s – ‘pre-history’.

In general, scholars see a rupture between this ‘pre-history’ of Genesis 1–11 and the subsequent chapters of the book of Genesis, in which one considers Abra(ha)m’s vocation narrative in Genesis 12 as the beginning of Israel’s ‘history’. Even if this caesura is correct from a literary perspective, it is an artificial one.

First of all, the character of Abra(ha)m is clearly introduced within the ‘primeval history’. That, at least, is what the genealogical lists within the book of Genesis aim to illustrate: Abraham is a direct descendant of the first human couple, Adam and Eve. Moreover, even if it does not imply that these chapters should be read as a historiography, also Genesis 1–11 presents itself as ‘history’ with several plots. This ‘history’ begins with the creation of cosmos and human-kind: in the poetic text of Genesis 1,1–2,4, creation is presented as a transition from chaos into order, whereas the narrative text about the paradise (Genesis 2,5–3,24) mainly focuses on the vicissitudes of the first human couple, Adam and Eve. As soon as Adam and Eve have to leave paradise, the reader of Genesis is confronted with ‘real’ life: when Cain kills his brother Abel (Genesis 4,1–16), the first murder ‘in history’ takes place. The narrative then continues in full speed: a first genealogy (Genesis 4,17–24) tells about Cain’s descendants. After a brief narrative section, narrating about the birth of Adam’s third son, Seth (Genesis 4,25–26), a second genealogy (Genesis 5,1–32) follows, starting with Adam, and finally presenting Noah (Genesis 5,29) and his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 5,32) to the reader.

The three chapters that follow (Genesis 6,1–8,22) narrate about the Flood, which is introduced by a short pericope about the intercourse of the sons of God and the daughters of humans (Genesis 6,1–4). At the end of the Flood narrative, God makes a ‘covenant’ with Noah, putting his bow as its everlasting sign (Genesis 9,1–17).

After a short passage about Noah’s drunkenness, creating a contrast between his son Ham – the ancestor of the Canaanites – and his brothers Shem and Japheth – the ancestors of Israel (Genesis 9,18–29), some more genealogies follow: Genesis 10,1–32 enumerates the descendants of Japheth, Ham and Shem, whereas Genesis 11,10–32 once more gives a genealogy of Shem that ends with Terah, Abra(ha)m’s father (Genesis 11,1–9 interrupts these genealogies with the narrative about the tower of Babel). Here, in Genesis 12, Israel’s ‘history’ starts.

2. Noah: a Source of Relief

In Genesis 5,29, at the end of the genealogy of Adam, Noah is introduced for the first time: he is the son of Lamech. Contrary to Adam’s other descendants, Noah’s name is explained. Lamech names his son Noah (*noah*), saying: “Out

of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands”.

Noah’s name-giving is a typical example of folk etymology. These folk etymological texts are very difficult to translate, and mostly, as the above translation illustrates, translators do not succeed in rendering these etymologies adequately. In order to understand the etymology of Noah, one needs to have a look at the Hebrew version of Genesis 5,29: the proper name Noah is related to the Hebrew verb *nâham*, which means ‘to comfort’ (*Piel*). Noah is the one who shall “bring us relief” (*jenaḥaménoû*).

The same root is used some verses later (Genesis 6,6), when God says that he “was sorry that he had made humankind” (*wayynâhâm – Nifal*). The wordplay continues in Genesis 6,8, where, inverting the consonants of Noah’s name (*nun* and *het*), it is said that Noah “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (*wenoaḥ maḥāhan*).

Finally, Noah’s name also seems to be reflected in Genesis 8,9, at the end of the Flood narrative, where it is said that “the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot”. Using the noun *mânôaḥ* (‘rest’), the author is not referring to the folk etymological interpretation of Noah’s name, but rather makes a link to verb *noûaḥ* (‘to rest’).

3. Some Reflections on the Flood Narrative in Genesis 6–9

Even if the person of Noah and the theme of destruction of the creation already have been introduced in Genesis 5,29.32; 6,1-8, the proper Noah story begins in Genesis 6,9, in which the so-called *tôledôt*-formula (*éllèh tôledôt noah*) functions as the opening formula.

At first sight, the Flood narrative seems to present a coherent story. In order to be saved from the Flood that God uses to punish humanity, Noah has to build an ark, taking very detailed instructions into consideration (Genesis 6,14-16). When the water rises and destroys everything and everybody, Noah survives in the ark.

When the water gradually recedes from the earth, and the ark comes to rest on the “mountains of Ararat” (Genesis 8,4), Noah sends out a raven. Afterwards, he sends three times a dove: the first returns to the ark because she did not find a “place to set its foot” (Genesis 8,9); the second one comes back with in her beak a freshly plucked olive leaf (Genesis 8,11); the third one did not return any more (Genesis 8,12) being an indication that the land has re-appeared. This is the sign for Noah to leave the ark. He builds an altar for God and offers burnt offerings. Smelling the pleasant odour, God says by himself: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done” (Genesis 8,21).

Notwithstanding this rather simple story line, as it stands now, the Noah narrative is undoubtedly a composite one, being the result of a complicated process of writing and editing of previous ‘sources’.

In contemporary research – but already in the footsteps of Jean Astruc’s *Conjectures sur la Genèse* (1753), who has divided the Flood narrative in different

documents (A, B, and C) that Moses has made use of in composing the book of Genesis – two major ‘strands’ – a Priestly and a ‘non-Priestly’ – strand are distinguished. This not only has been done because of the change in the use of the name of God (the tetragrammaton YHWH versus *elohîm*), but also because of some repetitions and contradictions within the narrative⁴.

For example, it is mentioned twice that Noah and his family enter the ark. In Genesis 7,7, one reads:

And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.

Albeit not completely identically, the same is said some verses later, in Genesis 7,13:

On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark.

Also the command to bring everything in the ark is mentioned twice. In Genesis 6,19-21, one reads:

¹⁹ And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ²⁰ Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. ²¹ Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.

In Genesis 7,1-3, an almost identical command is given:

¹ Then the Lord said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. ² Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; ³ and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.

Even if, in Genesis 6,19-21 and Gen 7,1-3 God’s command is narrated twice, it is also remarkable that there is a contradiction within this divine command: in Genesis 6,19, God commands Noah to bring “two of every kind into the ark (...) they shall be male and female”, whereas in Genesis 7,2, God commands Noah to take with him “seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate”, thus not only differing with regard to the number, but also focusing on the difference between clean and unclean animals.

⁴ For a detailed list of doublets and parallels in the Flood narrative, see D.M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures*, pp. 52-55

There also seem to be two different chronologies within the Noah narrative. According to Genesis 7,4, God announces to "send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights". Genesis 7,12 ("The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights") and Genesis 7,17 ("The flood continued forty days on the earth") go in the same direction. In Genesis 7,24; 8,3.24, on the contrary, one reads that "the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days". The same is true in Genesis 8,3 ("At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated").

Whatever the literary origins of the Biblical flood narrative may be, its theological messages in its current form are rather easy to discover. Without having the intention to be complete, I mention some of them.

(1) First of all, the narrative is illustrative of the theology that states that human sin is followed by divine punishment. As such, the Flood narrative is a typical example of the so-called retribution doctrine, which characterises many Old Testament texts.

The immediate cause for the Flood as a divine punishment becomes clear in Genesis 6,1-4. The intention of this enigmatic passage about sons of God copulating with daughters of men is clear: it will legitimate the destroying Flood, sent by God: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6,5).

(2) The Flood narrative presents a disappointed God. "In the beginning", God had a dream of a perfect world. The creation poem in Genesis 1,1-2,4, as well as the so-called Paradise narrative in Genesis 2-3 depict God's ideal world: a luxury five star paradise. But very soon, God is confronted by an endless series of disappointments. Intended to be equal human beings, man ('Adam') very soon started considering women ('Eve') as inferior ('Adam' describes 'Eve' as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" [Genesis 2,23]) and blamed her being at the origin of evil (Genesis 3,12: "The women [...] gave me the fruit from the tree"). Even their banishment from their five star oasis, in the hope that the hard labor of being farmers would make human beings more peace loving and humble, did not have impact. On the contrary: Adam and Eve's firstborn son Cain murders his brother Abel (Genesis 4,1-16). The more human beings increase in number, the more violent they become. God could not conclude otherwise, than that his experiment had failed.

As an artist, who, disappointed when he does not succeed in realizing what he had in mind, throws away his failed painting or sculpture and decides to start again, so God decides to destroy the earth and its inhabitants, and to 'reset' his creature.

(3) In the Flood narrative, God is presented as a 'God in motion'. The God at the beginning of the narrative is not the same as the God at its end. It seems that God himself has been changed by the Flood he has caused. When yhwh smells Noah's burnt offerings (Genesis 8,21-22), he solemnly proclaims:

²¹ I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done²². As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

As such, the biblical monotheistic religion – or better: the statement that the God of Israel is the only God who should be worshipped (monolatry) – is much more complicated than a polytheistic one. While in polytheistic religions, a God of anger can be considered to be responsible for evil, contrary to a(nother) God of mercy who always chooses the side of humankind, in a monotheistic religion, both characteristics have to be combined within one single God. This results in the presentation of a non-static Biblical God. Being angry and disappointed at the beginning of the Flood narrative, he evolves into a God of mercy and compassion at the end of it.

(4) Within the Noah narrative, we find for the first time a term that will be central within Biblical literature. In Genesis 6,6, God announces to Noah that he will establish his ‘covenant’ with him. In Genesis 9,9, God indeed does as such: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you”.

In general, the Hebrew term *berît* that is used here, is translated as ‘covenant’. However, this is not a correct rendering of its usage here. A covenant implies two (equal) parties, who can negotiate on the conditions both parties will agree to accept. In the Noah narrative, however, there is no room for negotiations. Noah has nothing to say. It is God who imposes a ‘covenant’ to Noah.

Closely linked to the theme of the ‘covenant’ is the appearance of the (rain) bow that God places in the clouds (Genesis 9,14-15):

¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

As such, the Flood narrative also has an etiologic function: in a non-scientific way, it explains the origin of a natural phenomenon.

(5) Within the Flood narrative, also the element of election is highlighted. God elects Noah and his family to be saved. However, at the beginning of the narrative, it is not explicitly said why in particular Noah and his family will be saved, even if, in the course of the narrative, Noah is presented as obedient to God’s commands (see Genesis 6,22: “Noah did all that God commanded him”). Within the framework of the above mentioned doctrine of retribution, people will have looked for a reason why precisely Noah has been saved. Against this background, Noah’s impeccability as the reason for his election is, for example, accentuated in the book of Jesus Sirach: “Noah was found perfect and righteous; in the time of wrath he kept the race alive; therefore a remnant was left on the earth when the flood came” (Sirach 44,17).

Even if some typical features of biblical 'theology' may be clearly present, the beautiful and rich biblical Flood narrative is not at all typically biblical. This brings us to the second part of this paper, dealing with some other Flood traditions.

4. Noah and the Babel-Bibel-Streit

The 19th century has marked a turning point within the study of the book of Genesis. In 1853, the Assyriologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered the cuneiform *Gilgamesh* epic, a text that narrates about an enormous flood that overwhelms the earth. The text has been deciphered and translated in 1872 by George Smith, who also translated the *Atrahasis* epic in 1876.

During the following years, these and other texts have profoundly influenced the debate about the origin and meaning of the first chapters of the book of Genesis. In particular some interventions by the German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch have been determinative in this regard. From 1902 on, Delitzsch has been reading papers in Berlin (later also in Barmen, Köln and Frankfurt) with the title *Babel und Bibel*⁵. These lectures were at the origin of the so-called *Babel-Bibel-Streit*. The commotion about Delitzsch's speeches led to the decline of the conviction that the Bible should be considered as 'original' literature, and witnessing the fact that ancient Israel, both in the cultural and in the religious sphere would have been much better than the surrounding peoples and their gods and idols. On the contrary, these extra-biblical literary texts made clear that biblical literature in general, and the texts on the Flood in particular have to be read and studied against the historical and literary background of the ancient Near East.

The motif of a destroying Flood can be found within many cultures. One of the oldest texts is indeed the above mentioned so-called Mesopotamian *Atrahasis* Epic. Even if most of its versions date from the 7th century BCE, the oldest version of this cuneiform epic dates from 17th century BCE⁶. The text starts with the description of the hard work of the lower gods: they have to dig rivers (Tigris and Euphrates) and springs, and are forced to heap up mountains. When they start to revolt, the gods – under the stimulus of the god Enki – decide to create human beings who can serve the gods. To that end, they slaughter a god (Aw-ilu), and mix his blood and flesh with clay. When, however, the human population increases, and disturbs the gods with its increasing noise, the gods decide to destroy humankind by a flood. In a dream, however, Enki alarms Atrahasis for the coming disaster, and assigns him to build a boat in order to escape the Flood:

Flee the house, build a boat. (...) Roof her over like the depth. So that the sun shall not see inside her. Let her be roofed over fore and aft. The gear should be very

⁵ See in particular K. Johanning, *Der Bibel-Babel-Streit*; R.G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel-Streit*.

⁶ For the complete English translation, see B.R. Foster, *Atra-hasis*, pp. 450-453.

strong. The pitch should be firm, and so give (the boat) strength. I will shower down upon you later a windfall of birds, a spate(?) of fishes". He opened the water clock and filled it. He told it of the coming of the seven-day deluge. Atrahasis received the command. He assembled the elders at his gate. Atrahasis made ready to speak and said to the elders: "May god [does not agree] with your god, Enki and [Enlil] are constantly angry with each other. They have expelled me from [the land?]. Since I have always revered [Enki], [he told me] this. I can [not] live in [...], nor can I [set my feet on] the earth of Enlil. (...) His family he brought on board while one was eating and another was drinking. He went in and out; he could not sit, could not kneel, for his heart was broken, he was retching gall. The outlook of the weather changed, Adad began to roar in the clouds. The god they heard, his clamor. He brought pitch to seal his door. By the time he had bolted his door, Adad was roaring in the clouds. The winds were furious as he set forth. He cut the mooring rope and released the boat.

The Atrahasis epic ends shortly after the Flood. The gods regret their action when they become hungry and thirsty because there are no more human beings to serve them. Finally, when they find out that Atrahasis has survived, they decide that a limited number of human beings can reproduce.

The motif of the Flood is dealt with even much more extensive in the so-called *Gilgamesh* epic. The oldest cuneiform tablets of this text date from the 13th century BCE (although the epic undoubtedly is much older). It tells about Gilgamesh, king of Uruk in Babylonia. As a real despot, he was making life on earth very hard. For that reason, the gods created the monster Enkidu as his opponent, who finally will become Enkidu's friend. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh starts a search for eternal life. During his search, he meets Utnapistim, who has survived a Flood.

In the eleventh tablet of the *Gilgamesh* epic, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh how the god Ea has informed him that a Flood would be destroying the world, and that he, in building an ark, in which he had to take his family and "seed of all living things", could escape the Flood:

Utnapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh: "Let me reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, a hidden matter, and a secret of the gods let me tell you. Shuruppak, a city you know of, [and which on] Euphrates [bank] is situated, that city was ancient and the gods were within it. The great gods resolved to send the deluge. They [sw]ore their father Anu, their counsellor the warrior Enlil, their throne-bearer Nimurta, their canal-officer Ennugi. The leader Ea was under oath with them. He repeated their plans to the reed hut: "Reed hut, reed hut, wall, wall! Listen reed hut, be mindful, wall! Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu, destroy this house, build a ship. Forsake possessions, seek life. Build an ark and save life. Take aboard hip seed of all living things. The ship which you shall build, let her dimensions be measured off. Let her width and length be equal, roof her over like a hidden depth."

I understood full well, I said to Ea my lord, "[Your command], my lord, which you spoke just so, I shall faithfully execute. What shall I answer to the city, the multitude, and the elders?" Ea made ready to speak, saying to me, his servant: "Young man, do you speak to them thus: 'It seems that Enlil dislikes me, I cannot dwell in your city, I may not set my foot on the dry land of Enlil, I shall go down to the depths and dwell with my lord Ea. [Upon] you shall he shower down in abundance (...)'"

On the fifth day I laid her framework, one full acre was her floorspace, ten dozen cubits each as the height of her walls, ten dozen cubits each were the edges around her. I laid out her contours, I sketched out her lines, I decked her in six, I divided her in seven. Her interior I divided nine ways, I drove the waterplugs into her. I saw to the spars and laid in what was needful. Thrice 3600 measures of pitch I poured in the oven. Thrice 3600 measures of tar did [I pour out] in side her. Thrice 3600 measures of oil for the workers who carried the baskets, aside from the 300 measures of oil that the caulking consumed, and twice 3600 measures of oil that the boatmen stored away. For the [builders] bullocks were slaughtered, and I killed sheep every day. Fine beer, [grape] wine, oil and date wine [did I give] the workers [to drink] like drinking water. They made a feast as on New Year's Day. [I opened?] ointment, dispensed (it) with my own hand. On the seventh day (?) the ship was completed (...). They brought on gang planks (?), fore and aft. [They ca]me [up] her (side?) two thirds (of her height?). [Whatever I had] I loaded upon her; what silver I had I loaded upon her; what gold I had I loaded upon her; what living creatures I had I loaded upon her. I made go aboard all my family and kin, beasts of the steppe, wild animals of the steppe, all skilled craftsmen I made go on board. Shamash set for me an appointed time: "In the morning when it spates in cakes, in the evening when it rains in grain, go into your ship, batten the door!" That appointed time arrived: in the morning spates in cakes, in the evening rain in grain. I gazed upon the appearance of the storm. The storm was frightful to behold! I went into the ship and battened my door, to the caulker of the ship, to Puzur-Amurri, the boatman. I gave (away my) palace, with all its possessions.

At the first glimmer of dawn, a black cloud rose up from the horizon. Inside [the cloud] Adad was thundering. While Shullat and Hanish went on before, moving as a retinue over hill and plain, Erragal tore out the dike posts. Nimurra came and brought with him the dikes. The Anunna-gods held torches aloft, setting the land ablaze with their glow. Adad's awesome power passed over the heavens, whatever was light he turned into darkness. [He smote ...] the land, it shattered like a pot! For one day the storm wind [...]. Swiftly it blew, [the flood cam]e forth. It was passing over the people like a battle. No one could see his neighbor, nor could the people see each other in the downpour. The gods became frightened of the deluge, they shrank back and went up to Anu's highest heaven. The gods cowered like dogs, crouching outside. Ishtar screamed like a woman in childbirth, and sweet-voiced Belet-[ili] moaned aloud: "Would that day had turned to nought, when I spoke up for evil in the assembly of the gods! How could I have spoken up for evil in the assembly of the gods, and spoken up for an assault to the death against my people? It was I myself who bore my people! (Now) like fish spawn they choke up the sea." The Anunna-gods were weeping with her, the gods sat where they were (?), weeping. Their lips were parched (?), taking on a crust.

Six days and [seven] nights the wind continued, the deluge and windstorm levelled the land. When the seventh day arrived, the windstorm and deluge left off their assault, which they had launched, like a fight to the death. The sea grew calm, the tempest grew still, the deluge ceased. I looked at the weather, stillness reigned, and all of mankind had turned into clay. The landscape was flat as a terrace. I opened the hatch, daylight fell upon my face. Crumpling over, I sat down and wept, tears running down my face. I beheld the edges of the world, bordering the sea. At twelve times sixty leagues a mountain rose up. The boat rested on Mount Nimush. Mount Nimush held the boat flat, not allowing it to move. One day, a second day Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not allowing it to move. A third day, a fourth day Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not allowing it to move. A fifth day, a sixth day mount Nimush held the boat fast, not allowing it to move. When the

seventh day arrived, I released a dove to go free. The dove went and returned. No landing place came to view, it turned back. I released a swallow to go free. The swallow went and returned. No landing place came to view, it turned back. I sent a raven to go free. The raven went forth, saw the ebbing of the waters, it ate, circled, left droppings, did not turn back. I released (all) to the four cardinal points. I set up an offering stand on the top of the mountain. Seven and seven cult vessels I set out. I heaped reeds, cedar, and myrtle in their bowls. The gods smelled the savor. The gods smelled the sweet savor. The gods crowded around the sacrificer like flies⁷.

When Enlil, the god who has initiated the flood, notices that Utnapishtim has survived the Flood, he becomes angry. Similar to the – implicit – theme of retribution within the biblical Flood account, Ea reproaches to him: “How could you, unreasoning, have brought on the deluge? Impose punishment on the sinner for his sin, on the transgressor for his transgression”⁸.

The many parallels of the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics make clear that the Biblical narrative of the Flood is not at all original. Besides some striking similarities between the biblical and non-biblical flood accounts, one cannot deny that they also differ on important issues. However, a founded judgement on the matter whether the author of the biblical account did know the Babylonian versions is hardly possible.

5. Some Perspectives from the Reception History

The Noah narrative should not only be read against the background of ancient Near Eastern texts as the Atrahasis and the Gilgamesh epics. It also is at the origin of a reception history, which starts already within the Old Testament itself. Besides texts that explicitly refer to the figure of Noah – we already mentioned Sirach 44,17⁹ –, an implicit reference to the Flood narrative is made within the book of Exodus.

In Exodus 2, one reads about the birth and the ‘rescue’ of Moses. The narrative is well known, and a brief summary of it will immediately demonstrate some similarities with the Flood narrative in Genesis 6–8.

At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob, together with his twelve sons, has arrived in Egypt. The book of Exodus starts by mentioning that, when the generation of the ancestors has died “the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1,7). Pharaoh, getting afraid that the Israelite people could become more numerous and powerful than the Egyptians, tried “to oppress them with forced labor” (Exodus 1,11). However, the harder the Egyptians oppress, the more the

⁷ B.R. Foster, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 458-460.

⁸ B.R. Foster, *Gilgamesh*, p. 460.

⁹ An explicit reference to Noah also can be found in Isaiah 54,9-10, as well as in Ezekiel 14,14,20; 1 Chronicles 1,4. Moreover, in referring to “the bow in the cloud on the day of rain”, Ezekiel 1,29 makes allusions to the Flood story.

Israelites multiply. Then, Pharaoh orders the Israelite midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill the new-born Israelite boys. When this plan also fails, Pharaoh commands all his people: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (Exodus 1,22).

Even if there are many differences¹⁰, the resemblances to the Flood narrative are clear: a threat is combatted by water, both in the Genesis as in the Exodus narrative. As in the Flood story, one hero will be saved by God, in order to ensure the future of humankind (in Genesis) or of the people of Israel (in Exodus). In Exodus 2, it is narrated how a son – later, in Exodus 2,10, his name will be mentioned: Moses – is born to a couple from the house of Levi. His mother hides him during three months. When she cannot hide her son any longer, she "got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river" (Exodus 2,3). The basket is found by the daughter of Pharaoh, who rescues the baby that will, consequently, grow up at Pharaoh's court.

In Hebrew, we read that Moses is put in a *tébâh*. Outside the narrative about Moses' rescue, within the Hebrew Bible, this word only occurs within the Flood narrative, where it has a key function. Indeed, the ark which Noah has to build and that will save him his life – and ensure the continuation of humanity – is indicated by the same lexeme¹¹. There can be no doubt: just like Noah has been saved by God thanks to an ark in order to guarantee the continuation of humanity, so Moses, also miraculously saved by God thanks to an 'ark', will guarantee the continuation of Israel as a people. Making use of this central motif of the death-bringing water and the life-saving ark, the author of the Exodus narrative makes it clear from the very beginning: with Moses, a new Noah is born, a hero who will rescue the Israelites.

Also in the so-called inter-testamental period, the person of Noah seems to have inspired authors. In particular his extra-ordinary characteristics seems to have been highlighted. In the Ethiopic book of Enoch (1 Enoch; 2nd century BCE–1st century CE), Noah is presented as an extra-ordinary child, already from his birth on:

And after some days my son, Methuselah, took a wife for his son Lamech, and she became pregnant by him and bore him a son. And his body was white as snow and red as a rose; the hair of his head as white as wood and his *demdema* [long and curly hair – H.A.] beautiful; and as for his eyes, when he opened them the whole house glowed like the sun – (rather) the whole house glowed even more exceedingly. And when he arose from the hands of the midwife, he opened his mouth and spoke to the Lord with righteousness. And his father, Lamech, was afraid of him and fled and went to Methuselah his father, and he said to him: "I have begotten a strange son. He is not like an (ordinary) human being, but he looks like the children of the angels of heaven to me; his form is different, and he is not like us.

¹⁰ Undoubtedly, some of these differences are intentional: when God succeeds in destroying evil humanity by water, Pharaoh will not succeed in destroying the just Israelites.

¹¹ Genesis 6,14[bis].15.16[bis].18.19; 7,1.7.9.13.15.17.18.23; 8;1.4.5.9.10[bis].13.16.19; 9,10.18

His eyes are like the rays of the sun, and his face glorious. It does not seem to me that he is of me, but of angels; and I fear that a wondrous phenomenon may take place upon the earth in his days. So I am beseeching you now, begging you in order that you may go to his (grand)father Enoch, our father, and learn from him the truth, for his dwelling place is among the angels”¹².

The presentation of Noah as an extraordinary person can also be found in the so-called Genesis apocryphon, a literary work – probably going back to the 2nd century BCE – that has been discovered in 1947 among the Dead Sea scrolls in Qumran (1Q20 – 1QapGen). The Aramaic work, copied around the beginning of common era, develops, in an auto-biographic style, some themes of Genesis 6–15. In the 2nd column of the scroll, Noah’s birth is narrated. As in 1 Enoch, Noah seems to be so extraordinary that his father Lamech is no longer sure that he is indeed his father (Genesis 5,28-29), but that “the conception was (the work) of the Watchers, and the pregnancy of the Holy Ones, and it belonged to the Nephil[in]”¹³. So Lamech asks his wife Bitenosh to tell him the truth. Her answer is clear:

O my lord and brother! [Remember] my sexual pleasure. I swear to you by the Great Holy One, by the king of the hea[ven]s ... that this seed comes from you, that this pregnancy comes from you, that the planting of [this] fruit comes from you ... and not from any foreigner nor from any of the watchers or sons of heav[en]”¹⁴.

Columns VI–XVII present themselves as the “book of the words of Noah”¹⁵. Here, Noah presents himself as a righteous man: “I was planted for truth, and all my life I behaved in truth, and walked in the paths of eternal verity, and with me the hol[y]”¹⁶. Although some passages of the Genesis apocryphon are quite similar to the biblical account about Noah (e.g. Noah’s drunkenness in Genesis 9,20-27 and 1QapGen 12), most of the traditions about Noah in 1QapGen (e.g. Noah’s visions and the division of the land under his sons) do not have a counterpart in the biblical text.

Finally, an extensive version of the Flood narrative also can be found within the Book of Jubilees, one of the most important para-biblical texts. The complete text can only be read in an Ethiopic translation of a lost Greek version. However, scholars always have been presupposing that Jubilees originally has been written in Hebrew. This presupposition has been confirmed by the discovery of fifteen fragmentary copies of the text in Qumran (two from cave 1; two from cave 2; one from cave 3; nine from cave 4; one from cave 11). In Jubilees 5–10, several stories about Noah can be found. The narrative of the Flood is rather marginal. More

¹² E. Isaac, 1 Enoch, p. 86.

¹³ F. García Martínez & E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 29.

¹⁴ F. García Martínez & E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 29-31.

¹⁵ F. García Martínez & E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 31.

¹⁶ F. García Martínez & E. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 31. In 1QapGen 6,7 the name of Noah’s wife is mentioned: Amzara.

important is the document's focus on legal and ritual elements (on injustice, blood pollution, first fruits), as well as the division of the earth for Noah's sons.

In the context of what has been said concerning the doctrine of retribution – the Flood as a divine punishment for evil human behaviour –, the book of Jubilees considers the Flood as a turning point:

For the children of Israel it has been written and ordained: "If they return to him in righteousness, he will forgive all of their sins and he will pardon all of their transgressions." It is written and it is ordained. "He will have mercy on all who return from all their error, once each year." But to any who corrupted their way and their counsel before the Flood, he did not show partiality, except Noah alone, for he showed partiality to him for the sake of his sons whom he saved from the waters of the Flood (and) for his sake because his heart was righteous in all of his ways just as it was commanded concerning him. And he did not transgress anything which was ordained for him¹⁷.

6. Conclusion

Even if the narrative of Noah's ark and the Flood as such do not seem to have been one of the major themes of the Bible, some very important elements are present *in nucleus* within these chapters of Genesis. Being part of the primeval 'history', the Noah tale clearly functions as a bridge between 'prehistory' and Israel's 'history', introducing the motif of the 'covenant'. *In se*, the Noah story has nothing to do with 'history'. As the brief presentation of the Gilgamesh and the Atrahasis epic has made clear, the motif of a massive Flood, the destruction of humankind as a punishment by (the) god(s), and the rescue of a hero due to a divine intervention are common themes. Within biblical tradition, it is precisely this miraculous saving of the hero from destroying water that has become the prototype of Moses: just like Noah, saved by God from the flood and thus guaranteeing the 'survival' of the creation, so Moses, saved on a miraculous way from the water of the Nile, will become Israel's saviour.

Thus, biblical scholarship of the last two centuries has made it clear, the fact that the Noah story is not history, but story. This implies that we do not have to look for a historical basis within these mythical texts, even if people have always been struck by deathly inundations, and that it is not impossible that such an inundation has inspired the authors of these flood myths. As a result, the numerous attempts explaining current geological phenomena against its background or digging for Noah's ark should only be taken as seriously as looking for the land of Cockaigne¹⁸.

¹⁷ O.S. Wintermute, Jubilees, p. 65.

¹⁸ Just to mention two titles: C.A. Hill, *The Grand Canyon* and L.G. Collins, *Noah's Ark*, pp. 218-228..

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Abstract

The Biblical Flood narrative is part of Israel's so-called primeval history as narrated in the book of Genesis (Gen 6-9). However, this story about Noah, a human hero and his family, who are saved by God from a devastating flood – sent by the deity itself – in order to be the father of a new era, has not been invented by the Biblical authors themselves. Undoubtedly, they have been inspired by much older texts such as the Mesopotamian Atrahasis or Gilgamesh epics. In its turn, however, the Biblical Noah narrative has again given rise to many interpretations, both in Jewish and in Christian literature. This paper demonstrates that an adequate understanding of the biblical narrative should take its literary context into account. In addition to that, it aims at illustrating how Noah has become an important and influential theological motif.