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Two

## Washing Up and Starting Over: The Covenant with Noah

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*Suggested Reading: Genesis 3–9*

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### The Sad Story from Adam to Noah

At the end of Genesis 2, we are at a highpoint: the newly married Mr. and Mrs. Adam are living in their palatial garden paradise and enjoying a close relationship with their Father-God.

But we all know the good times didn't last for long. At the beginning of Genesis 3, a snake shows up. Snakes are almost never a good thing in the Old Testament.

In the present case, the snake begins to cast doubt on the trustworthiness of God and his word. God had told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because it would lead to their death. But the snake presses Eve on the point. "Did God *really* say . . . ?" the snake begins and goes on to outright contradict what God had told Adam and

Eve: "You will *not* die. . . . For God knows when you eat of it . . . you will be like God" (Gn 3:1-4; emphasis mine).

The snake's basic message is this: "You can't trust God as your loving Father. His rules aren't for your good. He just doesn't want you to experience the kind of life he enjoys."

Eve buys this line. Looking at the apple, she sees it is tasty, pretty, and will make her smart as God—so why not eat it? She also gives some to Adam, and he eats (Gn 3:6).

Adam has been strangely passive in this whole affair, although he seems to be nearby. What's been going on? Why doesn't he say or do anything? We want to ask: "Hey, Adam, what about your duty to 'guard' the garden? How did this snake get in here?"

The snake promised them godlike knowledge when they ate of the fruit. Instead, the only real knowledge they gain from eating the fruit is to find out . . . they're naked! They also experience new sensations: shame and fear. When God comes in the afternoon, they can't go out to walk and talk with him as usual. They hide—as if it were possible to escape the Father who made them.

When God finally tracks them down, Adam accepts no responsibility for eating the fruit: "The Woman whom you gave to me, she gave me the fruit, and I ate" (Gn 3:12). Notice this clever ploy, which middle managers and bureaucrats have been using ever since: pass the buck both up and down the chain of command at the same time. "The woman"—it's all her fault—"whom you gave me"—and it's your fault, too, God, for giving her to me! Eve can't (or won't) top Adam's evasion of responsibility: "The snake tricked me, and I ate" (Gn 3:13).

In the following verses, God administers a punishment appropriate to each of the three guilty parties, and Adam and

Eve are removed from the Garden where they had access to the Tree of Life (Gn 3:14-23).

God places a cherub (a guardian angel) on the east side of Eden, to keep Adam away (Gn 3:24). Why doesn't he just walk around to the north, west, or south? As mentioned above, the ancient readers would have known that Eden was not just a garden but also a temple, and the ancient Israelite temple had only one entrance, facing east.

So is God a petty tyrant, throwing Adam and Eve out because they broke his little rule? No. A son who distrusts his Father and joins up with his Father's enemies can't stay living in the family home. A priest who doesn't have faith in the words of his God can't stay serving in the temple. God doesn't have many options in this matter, especially since there seems to be little in the way of repentance or apologies coming from any of the guilty parties.

He does kindly clothe Adam and Eve in skins, which made much better clothing than fig leaves they had been using. (Leather is still used for clothing, but leaf garments, for some odd reason, have never really caught on.) Of course, skins have to come from somewhere. You can't get skins without killing an animal, which points out an interesting aspect of the story. God told Adam and Eve that they would die when they ate the fruit. But they don't die. Something else dies in their place, and they are clothed in the skin of the dead animal. We don't know what animal (or animals) died and gave its skin to Adam and Eve, but it's often thought to be a lamb, based on biblical imagery.

There is a foreshadowing going on here. When he clothes Adam and Eve in the skin of the dead lamb, God is pointing forward to what will have to happen for Adam and Eve's disobedience to be completely fixed. A different Lamb of God

is going to have to die to take away the sins of the world and clothe humans in his righteousness (see Is 53:7 and 61:10).

Although he clothes Adam and Eve with animal skins, God does not want them to eat from the fruit of the tree of life—not out of a desire to punish them but because he doesn't want Adam and Eve to become immortal—and forever stuck—in their disobedient, rebellious condition.

In many ways, the rest of the story of the Bible, and the rest of the history of humankind, will be one, long road back to the Tree of Life, to Eden, and to Divine Childhood.

## East of Eden

Things don't get better when Adam and Eve are out on their own. Their oldest son, Cain, murders the younger Abel and then begins to populate the earth with his descendants, some of whom are more wicked than he was and even begin to do wrong-headed things like take two wives (Gn 4:19). This goes from bad to worse, until the "Sons of God" start taking as many wives as they want from the "Daughters of Men" in Genesis 6:1–5. People have puzzled over who is meant by the "Sons of God" since ancient times. The ancients often thought they were fallen angels. St. Augustine said they were the righteous descendants of Seth, Adam's third son. Some modern scholars suggest they were royalty, since "Son of God" was a term used for kings in antiquity. We can rule out fallen angels, but the other two interpretations are possibilities.

The multiple marriages (polygamy) of the "Sons of God" result in children who become "men of renown," or better, "men of notoriety" (Gn 6:4). These "notorious" descendants of these polygamous relationships seem to offend God, and the reason may have a commonsense explanation. Polygamous fathers have too many sons to properly parent. Wild, fatherless sons grow up to be a danger to other people and

lead a society into chaos. Such chaos is described in Genesis 6:5: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

God's response is to back up and start over. The evil actions of these "notorious" descendants provoke God to clean the earth with a flood and begin again, almost from scratch. God allows the world to return to a state of "tohu wabohu," with his Spirit (often translated "wind") moving over the face of the waters once more (compare Gn 1:2 with Gn 8:1). Then, for a second time, he pulls the dry land out of the water in an act of re-creation.

### The Rising of a New Son: Noah and His Covenant

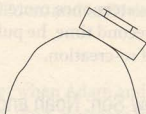
Noah and his family mark a new beginning for the human race. One may wonder, why just Noah? Why didn't God save the rest of humanity from the flood? The New Testament reveals that Noah was the only one interested in being saved (Heb 11:7). Noah is remembered as a "preacher of righteousness" who rebuked his contemporaries for what they were doing while he was building the ark (2 Pt 2:5). But no one paid any attention to the crazy man building the big boat, even though he was preaching and building a long time.

As I remarked above, the flood plunged the earth into a watery chaos that resembled the situation of "tohu wabohu" before God began the six days of creation. When the dry land reemerges 150 days later, Noah and his buoyant "zoological garden" (a "floating Eden") land on the top of Mount Ararat, a new mountain of God.

We can begin to sketch this out. First, Mount Ararat:



Now we can make the ark, which was a boxy, barge-like structure:



If we want to get fancy, we can open the door of the ark and let the giraffes and snakes out:



When Noah emerges from the ark, he performs a priestly act: he builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to God.



The Bible speaks of God “smelling the aroma” of the sacrifice and being moved with compassion for humanity and all creation. He makes a covenant with Noah:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you. . . . And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud . . . God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.” (Gn 9:8-13)



God seals his covenant with Noah using a “sign,” in this case, a rainbow:



What is the significance of this covenant? Earlier in Genesis 9, God spoke to Noah and his sons using words we have heard before:

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. . . . And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it.” (Gn 9:1-7)

All this language recalls Genesis 1 and God’s original covenant relationship with Adam. So we can say that this covenant with Noah is, in a sense, a renewal of the covenant with Adam. Only things are not quite as good any more: for example, now there is fear between man and the animals.

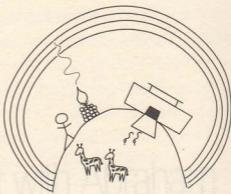
Despite the imperfections, the covenant with Noah brings us hope. Although the world is not perfect, humanity (Noah

and his family) is back in a relationship with God. The flood is a re-creation, and Noah, the new Adam.

This is how far we have progressed in salvation history:



Adamic Covenant



Noahic Covenant

### The Sad Story from Noah to Abraham

We ended the last chapter on a high note, with Noah, the New Adam, disembarking and beginning a new chapter in the history of humankind. Unfortunately, this new chapter quickly begins to sound a lot like the old chapter.

Already in Genesis, we read about a certain "fall" of Noah that bears a striking resemblance to an earlier "fall." Noah drinks wine, the fruit of his vineyard, and gets drunk and naked by his tent. His son Ham goes into the tent, "see his father's nakedness," and makes fun of him to his brothers. Shem and Japheth walk in backward and cover their father's "in-between." When Noah awakes, he realizes he has been violated and curses Ham's son Canaan.

This story is very strange to us and raises many questions. Why was Ham's sin so serious? Why did Noah feel violated?