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Retelling Noah and the Flood

A Fictional Encounter with Genesis 6–9

This article explores the retellings of and interactions with the biblical account of Noah and the flood (Gen 6–9) in modern literature. The four novels under scrutiny range from children's literature, via young adult fiction, to mainstream fiction. They also represent diverse traditions and perspectives: from markedly Jewish or Christian perspectives to more secular viewpoints. The article investigates how these novels fill in narrative gaps and provide the key *dramatis personae* with personality, background, and motivation for their actions. It also looks at how the novels respond to theological problems that the biblical account raises. Why did God decide to send the flood? Why were Noah and his family spared from the destruction? Did Noah preach repentance/intercede while building the ark? Finally, it notes how several of the novels engage with extra-biblical texts (e.g., the Gilgamesh Epic, the book of Enoch) in order to produce a coherent and involving plot.

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This article explores four examples of "Re-Scriptures," a term coined by Piero Boitani,[1] each comprising a fictional retelling of the biblical account(s) of Noah and the flood (Gen 6–9).[2] Even though several other scholars have written on fictional interaction with the flood narrative,[3] my present contribution differs from these other earlier discussions by its distinct approach. Rather than exploring this issue from the viewpoint of comparative literature, it looks at it from the perspective of *biblical* scholarship. First, in what ways do these novels fill narrative gaps in the biblical story? Secondly, what are the hidden theological problems—hidden yet inherent in the biblical text—that these fictional retellings bring to the light?[4] Moreover, what are the moral and ethical issues that are merely hinted at in Gen 6–9 and how are they being fleshed out in the worlds of the novels? Throughout my investigation, I shall relate to the select four novels as a kind of (aggadic) midrash which reveals and casts a spotlight upon issues that are present yet dormant in the biblical narrative.[5]

The flood narrative is a relatively popular literary motif and this paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive discussion. Instead, it focuses on a limited selection of four novels. These books range from children's literature, via books for young adults, to mainstream fiction; they represent diverse traditions and perspectives, and they are published over a period of nearly thirty

[1] Piero Boitani, *The Bible and Its Rewritings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), vi.

[2] In the present article, I am referring to the flood narrative in the singular. From the perspective of historical-critical scholarship, Gen 6–9 is very likely to be a composite text consisting of two textual strands (P and non-P [J]) that have been combined. See, e.g., the substantial discussion in David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 48–62.

[3] See, e.g., Vladimir Tumanov, "All Bad: The Biblical Flood Revisited in Modern Fiction," *Arcadia* 42, no. 1 (2007): 84–97 and Ewa Rychter, "When the Novel Meets the Bible: The Flood in Four Contemporary British Novels," *Anglophonia/Caliban* 33 (2013): 183–95.

[4] It should also be stated clearly that the present article is not interested in what might be termed "practical issues" such as the gathering of the animals and the disposal of their dung once on board the ship. For an extended discussion of the "realism" in many retellings of the flood narrative, see Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, "Refuse, Realism, Retelling: Literal and Literary Reconstructions of Noah's Ark," in *Subverting Scriptures: Critical Reflections on the Use of the Bible*, ed. Beth Hawkins Benedix (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23–41, especially 25–32. For a discussion of the attempts of earlier exegetes to show the credibility of the flood narrative, see, e.g., Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 33; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 66–91.

[5] Stahlberg's article "Refuse" comes closest to my own approach in its approach to the retellings as a form of midrash. On the issue of narrative gaps, see especially 24–25, 33.

years. This diversity is intentional insofar as I sought a heterogeneous body of retellings to study and compare.

My criteria for these particular four novels are largely personal insofar as I have chosen retellings which have captured my attention.[6] At the same time, my choice was guided by several principles. First, I wished to keep a tight focus on the interaction with the biblical text. As a result, I excluded all retellings of the Noah story which are set in a future, corrupt, and dystopian world.[7] I also chose not to interact with retellings that are ostensibly set in the patriarchal era yet betray knowledge of our modern world.[8] Finally, I decided not to discuss literary works the emphasis of which was more to offer a criticism of their contemporary times than to interpret the biblical narrative.[9] I therefore selected only such books that (1) preserve the overarching narrative story-line of the biblical *Vorlage* and (2) feature its major characters.[10] The four books in question are:

1. **Marianne Fredriksson, *Syndafloden* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1993).**[11] (Not available in English translation; available in German as *Sintflut*.)

   This Swedish novel, aimed at an adult audience, stays close to biblical narrative yet also adds elements found in the corresponding Mesopo-

[6] There are several other interesting and well-told literary retellings that I could have selected for my study, among them David Maine's *The Preservationist* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004), and Julian Barnes's "The Stowaway," in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989). For reasons of space, however, I decided not to discuss these works.

[7] As a result, I have chosen not to discuss books such as Barbara Cohen's *Unicorns in the Rain* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), or M. A. Nelson's *The Flood* (Lake Mary: Creation House, 2009).

[8] E.g. Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (Toronto: Viking, 1984) or Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* (London: Methuen, 1985).

[9] E.g. H. G. Wells's utopian novella *All Aboard for Ararat* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1940), which restates and reflects on revolutionary theory. See further J. R. Hammond, *An H. G. Wells Companion: A Guide to the Novels, Romances and Short Stories* (Literary Companions; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), 129–31.

[10] Rychter, "When the Novel," section 1.

[11] Marianne Fredriksson (1927–2007) was a Swedish journalist and novelist. She published 15 novels, many of which based on biblical stories. Her writing, focusing on women's lives, is influenced in general by her own interests in psychology, philosophy of religion, and history, and more specifically by the writings of C. G. Jung. The notion of friendship is a central theme in much of her writing. See further interview with Marianne Fredriksoon on her 75th birthday, "Jag ville ge en sannare bild av verkligheten," by Karin Thunberg, *Svenska Dagbladet*, Feburary 12, 2007.

tamian flood stories. The retelling gives the eight characters in Noah's family roughly equal narrative space and the perspective shifts between the various *dramatis personae*. The focal point of the retelling is the ethical problems associated with God's decision to drown his creation, combined with an interest in the relationships of the different members of Noah's family with each other and with people in the surrounding communities.

2. **Madeleine L'Engle, *Many Waters* (A Yearling Book; New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1986).**[12]

   This American fantasy novel for young adults (part of her *Time Quintet*) is written from a Christian perspective.[13] Its main protagonists, Dennys and Sandy, have travelled back in time to the period just before the flood where they meet Noah's family and neighbours. L'Engle invents new characters, such as Noah's daughter Yalith. Much of the plot concerns Dennys's and Sandy's love and worry for Yalith, given their foreknowledge of the biblical story. Will God destroy her or will he somehow manage to save her, despite the fact that she is not recorded in the Bible as being present on the ark? The overarching message of the novel is God's love combined with human trust and faith in him.[14]

3. **Geraldine McCaughrean, *Not the End of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).**[15]

   This British novel, geared primarily towards children, is narrated from the perspective of a non-biblical character, namely Noah's daughter Timna. The narrative follows the biblical story-line, yet its description of the period on the ark offers a dark vision of a time of which the

[12] Madeleine L'Engle (1918–2007) was a prolific American writer of predominantly young-adult fiction. Her books won many literary prices, among them the Newbery Medal (for the novel *A Wrinkle in Time*).

[13] Much of Madeleine L'Engle's writing is influenced by her Christian faith. At the same time, she resisted being called a "Christian writer," preferring instead to see herself as a "writer who is a Christian." See further Donald R. Hettinga, *Presenting Madeleine L'Engle* (Twayne's United States Authors Series 622; New York: Twayne, 1993), 15–16.

[14] See further Hettinga, *Madeleine L'Engle*, 112–119.

[15] Geraldine McCaughrean (1951–) is a British children's novelist, the author of more than 160 books. She has won many prestigious prices for her works, among them the Whitbread Children's Book Award (*A Little Lower Than the Angels, Not the End of the World*), the Carnegie Medal (*A Pack of Lies*). See further http://www.geraldinemccaughrean.co.uk.

biblical narrative is silent. As a whole, the book questions patriarchal values and fundamentalist attitudes by highlighting human (predominantly female) experience.[16]

4. **Anne Provoost, *In the Shadow of the Ark,* trans. John Nieuwenhuizen (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004).**[17]

   This Belgian (Young) Adult novel is devoted to both the time prior to the flood and the time on-board the ark. It adheres to the story-line of the biblical narrative, yet also adds new characters and contemporary emphases. In particular, it focuses on matters of good and evil, and questions how a merciful deity would select some people and leave others to suffer destruction.[18]

The ensuing discussion will explore how these four novels "fill" the theological and/or exegetical "gaps" that are present in the Genesis narrative, and thereby attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the connection between the story of the *nephilim* in Gen 6:1–4 and God's decision to destroy humanity in Gen 6:5–7?

2. What was Noah's responsibility towards people outwith[19] his immediate family? This question involves a subset of issues:

   a) What was Noah's reaction to God's information about his coming destruction? For example, did Noah preach repentance to the people (but they refused to listen), or did Noah keep God's message a secret, to ensure that nobody but the chosen few would have access to the ark?

   b) Did more people than Noah's immediate family (Noah, his three sons, their wives) end up on the ark? As such, did they receive permission or were they stowaways?

[16] For a summary of the plot, see Diane Samuels "The Drowning World," review of *Not the End of the World*, by Geraldine McCaughrean, in *The Guardian*, December 18, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/dec/18/booksforchildrenandteenagers.featuresreviews.

[17] Anne Provoost (1964–) is a Flemish author who is best known for her retellings of myths, folk takes, fairy tales and biblical narratives. She has won many prestigious prices for her books, among them the *Gouden Zoen*-award for *In the Shadow of the Ark*. See further http://www.anneprovoost.be.

[18] See http://www.anneprovoost.be/en/index.php/DeArkvaarders/Analyse.

[19] The common Scottish preposition "outwith" is similar in meaning to "outside of."

c) Did Noah and his wife have daughters and what happened to them?

d) What had the people in Noah's society done in order to deserve annihilation?

3. Is Ham Noah's second or third son (Gen 6:10; 9:24), and why is Canaan cursed for something his father Ham did (Gen 9:22)?

4. Is Noah's God the god of mainstream society or is he the god of a few (outcasts)?

Throughout my discussion, I wish to remain respectful of the biblical narrative. It is clear that these novels, to a varying degree, incorporate the values of the twentieth century into the biblical narrative, with the almost inevitable result that the biblical story comes out wanting. To cite Yvonne Sherwood, many modern retellings of biblical myths "are clearly forcing the biblical text to swallow twentieth-century models of thought or events that it simply cannot digest without poisoning (or deconstructing) itself."[20] For many of the fictional authors, their retellings of the flood narrative become vehicles "for affirming modern values."[21] This is true; it does not necessarily mean, however, that ancient readers were unaware of the many ethical problems inherent in Gen 6–9. These problems exist in embryonic form in the biblical flood narrative and are being highlighted when this narrative is read dialogically with other biblical texts, for instance with Exod 32:10–14 which stresses humanity's responsibility to plead with God, and with 1 Sam 15:29 and Ps 110:4 which emphasize God's constancy towards his creation.[22]

The *Nephilim* and the Flood

Gen 6:1–4 tells how the "sons of God" married human women (v. 2), an act which caused YHWH to limit the lifespan of humanity to 120 years (v. 3). At this time, the *nephilim* were on the earth (v. 4aα). As a result of the sexual union between the sons of God and the daughters of men, they

[20] Yvonne Sherwood, *Biblical Texts and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204. Cf. Rychter, "When the Novel," section 19.

[21] Tumanov, "All Bad," 19.

[22] Gen 6:6–7 are interconnected with these texts through their shared use of the verb נחם = "to change one's mind."

(m.pl.) bore children to them (m.pl.) (v. 4aβ, אשר יבאו בני האלהים אל בנות האדם וילדו להם. "They [the children / the *nephilim*] were the heroes who were of old, men of fame" (v. 4b, המה הגברים אשר מעולם אנשי השם). The syntax of verse 4 is complex and, as a result, the role and identity of the *nephilim* are ambiguous.[23] In traditional Jewish and Christian retellings of the story, the *nephilim* are identified with the children of the union and also as giants (see also below).[24]

In the final form of the biblical text, the story in Gen 6:1–4 is connected by way of the comment in Gen 6:5–8 to the following flood narrative.[25] This juxtaposition has encouraged readers, ancient and modern alike, to connect the (probably originally independent) narratives. Most prominently, *The Book of the Watchers* in *1 Enoch* 6–11 (ascribed to Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah) claims that the fallen angels taught humanity a wide range of matters, including metallurgy, cosmetics, and astrology/astronomy. As a result of this angelic-human interaction, according to *1 Enoch*, much godlessness arose and people were involved in fornication. This, in turn, made God decide to send the flood.[26]

Many of the selected novels interact with these later textual traditions. Most prominently, L'Engle depicts the *nephilim* as the evil (but very good-looking) counterparts of the *seraphim*. The former are fallen, earthbound angels who cannot return to heaven. To establish the connection between the *nephilim* and the fallen angels, L'Engle names one of the *nephilim* Ru-

[23] Cf. Ronald Hendel, "The Nephilim were on the Earth: Genesis 6:1–4 and its Ancient Near Eastern Context," in *The Fall of the Angels* ed. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Themes in Biblical Narrative 6; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 15–16.

[24] See further John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (LHBOTS 592; London: T&T Clark, 2013), 81–83, with cited bibliography.

[25] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1—11* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 128. For a possible ancient Near Eastern background to the connection of the two narratives, see Hendel, "Nephilim," 29–32.

[26] A comparable narrative is found in *Jubilees* 5.1. For a discussion of these later interpretations, see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "The Origins of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition: The Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 in the Second and Third Centuries B.C.E.," in *The Fall of the AngelsI*, ed. Christoph Auffarth and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Themes in Biblical Narrative 6; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 87–118, and J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, "Interpretation of the Flood Story in the Book of Jubilees," in *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Themes in Biblical Narrative 1; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 79–85, cf. Blenkinsopp, Creation, 121–27. For a detailed discussion which includes a comparison with Mesopotamian comparative material, see Helge S. Kvanvig, *Primeval History: Babylonian, Biblical, and Enochic: An Intertextual Reading* (SJSJ 149; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 402–28.

mael, identified in *1 Enoch* 69 as the twentieth of the twenty-one named fallen angels. In addition, to stress their God-defying character, another *nephil* is named after Eblis/Iblīs, the primary demon in Islam who refused to bow before Adam.[27] She further has one of the *nephilim* tempt the female characters in the book, employing wording reminiscent of that used by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:5): "how much you have to learn, about men's ways, and about El's ways, which are not men's ways. Will you let me teach you?"[28] This allusion to the biblical fall narrative thus hints at (but never spells out) the *nephilim*'s contributing role towards humanity's wickedness (cf. Gen 6:5).

In contrast, Fredriksson offers a more positive estimation of the *nephilim*. She refers to the sons of God as "angels" who fell in love with the human women, and describes their offspring (of which Noah's wife is one) as people living in harmony with each other and with the earth. The *nephilim* are older than humanity, gifted with unusual gifts (cf. *1 Enoch*), and they never knew sin in the sense they never saw the need to differentiate between good and evil. As aptly phrased in the novel by Noah in a moment of insight, "they never ate from the forbidden fruit."[29] Provoost also makes a connection, albeit a much weaker one. In her hands, the *nephilim* become a group of shadowy figures who are used as a reason for not talking openly about the plans to build the ark.

In sum, the juxtaposition of Gen 6:1–4 and Gen 6:5–8 has exerted influence on many, but not all, of the chosen modern authors. It is interesting to note that L'Engle, defining herself as a "writer who is a Christian" (cf. above, n. 13), makes the *nephilim* the most evil, and enhances her depiction of them with echoes from the fall narrative in Gen 3. These echoes place the *nephilim* on par with the serpent, and the women in L'Engle's retelling either give into or resist the temptation. Fredriksson likewise interacts with Gen 3, as well as the Enochian literature, but with strikingly different results. In her hands, the *nephilim* are not equated with the serpent; rather they are identified with a pre-fall creation which never ate the fruit at all. Eating the fruit is not to be understood as a sin, however, but instead as a rite of passage to become fully

[27] For information about Iblis in Islam, see Andrew Rippin, "Devil," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Georgetown University: Brill Online, 2016), http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/devil-EQSIM_00115.

[28] L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 47, as noted by Hettinga, *Madeleine L'Engle*, 115.

[29] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 43.

human.[30] At the same time, neither re-telling blames the *nephilim* for God's decision to send the flood. They are part of the fabric of the flood story but not the sole impetus of the flood.

Noah's Responsibilities

What was Noah's response towards people outwith his immediate family upon receiving the news that God would destroy "all flesh" and the earth (Gen 6:13b, והנני משחיתם את הארץ) and God's ensuing instruction to him to "build an ark of gopher wood" (Gen 6:14a, עשה לך תבת עצי גפר)? Who was saved on the ark and who was left behind? Who made this selection and what did this process of selection do to the people responsible for distinguishing between "the sheep" and "the goats"? The biblical account is silent on these topics, merely stating that "Noah did everything just as God commanded him" (Gen 6:22, ויעש נח ככל אשר צוה אתו אלהים כן עשה). Exegetes have, as a result, been eager to fill this narrative silence.

Intercession and Call to Repentance

The Hebrew Bible contains a number of narratives which feature human responses to God's planned destructions, the most famous examples being Abraham's intercession on behalf of the (potentially existing) righteous people of Sodom (Gen 19) and Moses's intercession on behalf of sinful Israel (Exod 32:10–14). In both cases, God shares his planned act of destruction with a select man, thus in a sense "inviting" them to contradict him.[31] These examples of intercession raise the poignant question vis-à-vis Noah's responsibility towards the people around him: Did God really intend for Noah to keep the news about the flood a secret or was God's sharing of the information in fact meant to trigger intercession and repentance? The biblical narrative portrays Noah neither as an intercessor nor as a preacher who is calling his community to repentance. Noah simply does what he is told, with the inevitable result that he appears as a person lacking compassion and, expressed harshly, normal human decency. He is following orders. It also problematizes the statement in Gen 6:9aβ that Noah was "a just man, perfect in his

[30] These thoughts are more developed in Fredriksson's earlier book *The Book of Eve*, the first in her trilogy called The Children of Paradise. The original title is *Evas bok* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1980).

[31] Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "God's Hidden Compassion", *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no.2 (2006): 191–213.

generation" (איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו). To what extent was he "just" and "perfect" if he merely obeyed God's instructions (Gen 7:5) without a word of protest? As many Jewish interpreters point out, he was just only *in his generation*, thus implying that he would not have been just at any other time in history![32]

Already early Jewish and Christian interpreters perceived Noah's blind obedience to be problematic, and thus read either intercession or calls to repentance into the text.[33] The same unease with Noah can be observed in many contemporary novels.[34] L'Engle in particular makes sure to state that Noah and the rest of his family members went out to warn the people in their community of the coming flood, with the rational, put in Noah's mouth, that "they have a right to be warned. To prepare. And who knows—if they repent, then perhaps El will not send the flood."[35] The people in L'Engle's book merely laugh at these warnings, however, thus exonerating Noah from blame and enabling God to send the flood in good conscience.

Fredriksson avoids the issue to a large extent by introducing new elements into the narrative. First, Noah is a ship-builder with his own shipyard. Secondly, Noah lives in a secluded area, best described as a small, largely autonomous area with diplomatic immunity. Taken together, Noah

[32] See, e.g., *Bereshit Rabbah* 30.9. See further Naomi Koltum-Fromm, "Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah's righteousness in Light of the Jewish-Christian Polemic," in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation: A Collection of Essays,* ed. Judith Frishman and Lucas van Rompay (Traditio Exegetica Graeca 5; Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 63, and Wout J. van Bekkum, "The Lesson of the Flood: מבול in Rabbinic Tradition," in *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Themes in Biblical Narrative 1; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 131.

[33] See further the discussion in Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "The Compassionate God of Traditional Jewish and Christian Exegesis", *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 2 (2007): 183–207. In contrast, the Qur'an 71:26 makes Noah more fervent: "And Noah said: 'My lord, do not leave upon the earth from among the disbelievers an inhabitant'" (Saheeh International Translation).

[34] In the Swiss author Brigitte Schär's retelling of the Noah story in "Die Prufung / Die Idee DES SCHÖPFERS," in *Und Gott Sprach… Biblische Geschichten neu erzählt*, ed. Friedrich Vilshofen (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), 41–54, Noah and his family gather together and, by using logical arguments why the ark will not work, manage to prevent the flood. Furthermore, like Moses in Exod 32:12, they appeal to God's vanity, although in a very different way. In contrast to the depiction in traditional Jewish and Christian exegetes, however, they do not appeal to God's mercy as they think of God as an amoral being. Rather, they convince him that he is not up to the task, as it is more complex and complicated than what he initially imagined. See further the discussion in Tumanov, "All Bad," 6–7.

[35] L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 286.

has the required expertise, as well as the necessary solitude, for building the ark without too much external interference. Thirdly, Fredriksson, unique among the four selected authors, allows more people than Noah's immediate family on board the ark. Clearly influenced by the flood narrative in the Gilgamesh epic, the story in her hands becomes less about preserving the animal kingdom and more (in Noah's own words) about saving "the talents of humanity."[36] As a result, Noah includes a smith, a potter, a weaver, a farmer, a gatherer of herbs, a rope-maker, and a carpenter on board the ark, and he saves the art of writing, as well as the tradition of poetry, music, and art.[37] Fredriksson furthermore makes clear that Noah is not responsible for deciding who will enter the ark; the selection is done "by itself" as people leave the shipyard when they realize that Noah has lost interest in building boats.[38]

In sharp contrast, Provoost's Noah (or "the Builder" as he is called) hides the knowledge of the oncoming flood, to the extent that even those members of his family (uncles) who are guarding the ark are fooled. Most of Noah's immediate family follow suit. They hire people to help build the ark, yet they do not share with them the purpose of the building project. A few outsiders, including the master ship-builder and his daughter Re Jana, the two chief protagonists of the story, suspect the truth, yet even they are barred from the ark. As a result, the reader develops no sympathy for Noah and his family, and instead ends up hoping for a different ending than the one narrated in Genesis.

The situation is again different in McCaughrean's book, yet the negative portrayal of Noah and his family persists. Given that the book begins with the entry into the ark, the reader receives no insight into Noah's actions prior to the flood. On the basis of Noah's subsequent actions, however, the reader can readily imagine the secrecy surrounding the building project. To hammer home the message, McCaughrean describes in vivid images the slow death

[36] See, e.g., Benjamin Foster, "Gilgamesh," in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 458–460, Tablet XI ("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"). For a discussion of the biblical flood narrative and its earlier Mesopotamian counterparts, see, e.g. the discussion by Ed Noort, "The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen 6:5–9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East," in *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Themes in Biblical Narrative 1; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 32.

[37] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 214.

[38] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 264.

of humanity. They do not give up. Instead, they swim and they hold on to flotsam and jetsam. When they see the ark, they rejoice and anticipate to be taken safely on board, only to be met by Shem and Ham who commit murder by pushing them back into the water in order to preserve Noah's (and God's) vision of a new society purged from evil.[39]

Together, these four stories fill the gap in the biblical narrative, each in their own way. While Provoost's and McCaughrean's portrayals take Noah's obedience in Gen 7:5 to the bitter end, Fredriksson and L'Engle transform Noah into a *mensch* in order to uphold the statement in Gen 6:9aβ.

Stowaways

The idea that space in the ark was limited raises the possibility of stowaways, i.e. the existence of people outwith Noah's family who survive hidden in the ark.[40] This is an important motif in McCaughrean's novel where Japhet and his sister (see further below) save a pair of siblings who have managed to cling to a hidden part of the ark. The same motif is prominent in the retelling by Provoost. Re Jana, the ship-builder's daughter, is denied entry to the ark yet, being Ham's (adulterous) lover, Ham manages to smuggle her on board together with her adopted younger brother. In parallel, her father is keeping himself alive on a raft that he has built. Towards the end of the book, Provoost re-aligns her retelling with the biblical *Vorlage* to a certain extent, in that Re Jana, rather than Ham's married wife Neelata, is the one to bear Ham's children, Neelata being barren. For all practical purposes, Re Jana is identified with the *function* of Ham's wife by being the woman who provides him with offspring.

[39] McCaughrean, *Not the End*, 15–20. Cf. the discussion of Findley's fictional retelling of the flood narrative in that book by David Jefferess, "A Pacific (Re)Reading of Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 72 (2000): 146–47. Jefferess points out the similarity between the Nazi ideology of purging Europe from its "impure" elements in order to create a "pure" society, and God's decision to destroy humanity in order to create it anew without blemish.

[40] This motif is given an interesting twist in Fredriksson's novel (314–17) but it is unconnected with the notion of someone hidden on board in order to survive, given Fredriksson's inclusive approach to the number of people on the ark. There is simply no need to hide anyone as anyone who wants to come on board is welcome.

Female Siblings

The biblical narrative in Gen 6–9 names only the four male characters.[41] On the basis of Gen 7:7, 13, however, the reader knows that four anonymous women also made it into the ark, namely their wives (cf. 1 Peter 3:20). The fact that 1) the Hebrew Bible is male-centred; 2) most families in the ancient world had more than three children; and 3) statistics suggest that approximately half of these children were girls, opens up the possibility that Noah had daughters. Through its conspicuous silence on the matter, the biblical narrative invites the reader to contemplate the possible existence of additional, female children and to ponder their fate in the flood.

McCaughrean makes a daughter of Noah her main protagonist, through whose critical eyes the reader experiences the story. The daughter, called Timna, is given a place on the ark, yet it is understood that her inclusion will have no future consequences as she lacks a husband. Her role will be to take care of her aging parents; her brothers will be fruitful and their children will inherit the earth. In McCaughrean's retelling, Timna is the voice of compassion, expressed predominantly via the aforementioned storyline of the stowaways. Her absence from the biblical story is, however, not as foreseen. Her destiny becomes detached from those of the ark, as she departs on a raft with the hope of meeting another group of survivors that they have encountered earlier on the journey. This other group is described by McCaughrean as an alternative and better new beginning of humanity, characterized by belief in hospitality and compassion. McCaughrean thus ultimately rejects the biblical narrative in Gen 6–9.

In contrast, remaining more closely to the biblical tradition in Genesis, L'Engle finds another way of dealing with Noah's potential daughters (four of them in total). The two youngest "daughters of men," named Mahlah and Yalith, function as potential marital partners whom the *nephilim* wish to secure as mothers of their children. While the elder Mahlah succumbs to the sexual allure of one of them, the younger Yalith resists the temptation (cf. also above).[42] L'Engle does not explicitly discuss the final fate of

[41] For a discussion of the lack of significance of the female characters in the flood narrative, see J. David Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 9.

[42] As Hettinga, *Madeleine L'Engle*, 115, points out, there are echoes of the Garden of Eden in the *nephil*'s attempt to seduce Yalith, as exemplified by his statement, "how much you have to learn, about men's ways, and about El's ways, which are not men's ways. Will you let me teach you?" (*Many Waters*, 47).

Mahlah, leaving her contently nursing her baby that she has conceived with her *nephil* husband, yet it is being tacitly understood that she, like her two elder sisters, will die in the flood. In contrast, Yalith does not die, but she also does not enter the ark, thus upholding the literal content of the biblical narrative. Instead, L'Engle chooses a largely unexpected route. Recalling Gen 5:24, L'Engle has Yalith, like her forefather Enoch, taken up (to heaven) (ויתהלך חנוך את־האלהים ואיננו כי־לקח אתו אלהים).[43] This narrative move turns Yalith into a model of faith and emphasizes God's pleasure in her (Heb 11:5–6; cf. Sir 44:16).[44]

The Surrounding Evil Society

Gen 6:5 states that "man's evil was great in the land and the desire of all his heart was to do evil all the time" (כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ וכל־יצר מחשבת לבו רק רע כל־היום). This situation, in turn, caused God grief and became the basis for his change of mind regarding his creation of humanity (Gen 6:6, וינחם יהוה כי־עשה את־האדם בארץ ויתעצב אל־לבו), with the result that he decided to wipe out humanity (6:7, ויאמר יהוה אמחה את־האדם אשר־בראתי מעל פני האדמה מאדם עד־בהמה עד־רמש ועד־עוף השמים כי נחמתי כי עשיתם). For many readers, the statement in Gen 6:6–7 is theologically problematic in that it appears to contradict the notion of an omniscient deity suggested in several other places in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 1 Chron 28:9; Jer 1:5). Did not God know the result already prior to giving humanity free will? Furthermore, even if human evil came as a surprise, does that in any way justify God's decision to drown his creation?

It might, at least in theory, be possible to escape this ethical conundrum by describing Noah's compatriots as rotten to the core. Interestingly, though, none of the select authors go down that path.[45] Instead, they choose to deal with the eternal question of innocent suffering, not only allowed by God but also actually instigated by him. They thus proceed to highlight this

[43] L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 294–97, 302–3.

[44] See the discussion of Enoch in extra-biblical material in Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 118–21. For the role of Yalith's faith, see further Hettinga, *Madeleine L'Engle*, 117.

[45] Interestingly, books for younger children are less circumspect. While some omit any reference to the destruction, focusing instead on the people on board the ark, others emphasize the wickedness of the surrounding society. For a discussion of retellings of the flood narrative for young children, see Emma England, "'The Water's Round My Shoulders, and I'm—GLUG! GLUG! GLUG!': God's Destruction of Humanity in the Flood Story for Children," in *Text, Image, and Otherness in Children's Bibles: What Is in the Picture?* ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Hugh S. Pyper (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 213–39.

theological problem, extant already in the biblical narrative. Furthermore, all four authors agree that the flood was a failure: the flood worsened humanity rather than improving it.

Fredriksson remains closest to the biblical narrative in her description of a world where people commit all kinds of evil, symbolized, on the one hand, by the Northern totalitarian state that has murdered its priesthood and abolished its religious cult, and, on the other hand, by the Southern state which flourishes due to slave labour. Neither society is painted fully in black, however. In fact, Fredriksson takes pain to ensure the readers that both states contain decent and upright people. After the flood, Fredriksson has Noah declare the flood a disaster, having failed to accomplish what it set out to do. Rather, Noah envisages that humanity will become more evil now when they have lost their faith in God's goodness.[46]

Turning to L'Engle, her envisioned society in the oasis where Noah lives contains a number of less-than-savoury characters, exemplified by some people's wilful act of throwing Dennys onto a garbage dump instead of healing his serious sunburns; but this behaviour is a far cry from the statement of total evil in Gen 6:5. L'Engle, alone among the cited authors, does not dwell at length on the issue of undeserved suffering, yet it is present in her book in the form of Dennys's and Sandy's worry about the fate of Yalith. The teenagers argue that "she is really *good*," only to receive the *seraphim*'s reply that "goodness has never been a guarantee of safety."[47] L'Engle also touches upon the futility of the flood, expressed by Sandy in the statement that "there seemed to be less and less point to the flood" as human evil continued afterwards.[48]

As to Provoost's and McCaughrean's worlds, the situation—at least from a modern perspective—is turned upside-down as the reader perceives that Noah and his family, rather than the surrounding people, are the real "bad guys." Re Jana actually states that the people who participated in the building of the ark were "people of good will," far from evil and depravity, and she is shocked when she realizes that they will be killed. Poignantly, Re Jana tells Ham that if he were really good, he would give up his place on the ark in favour of someone else.[49] Re Jana also echoes Sandy's thoughts as she can observe no change in humanity after the flood.[50]

[46] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 342–43.
[47] L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 277–80.
[48] L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 227–228.
[49] Provoost, *Shadow of the Ark*, chaps 21–22. See also Tumanov, "All Bad," 11–12.
[50] Provoost, *Shadow of the Ark*, 362.

McCaughrean makes a similar point in a roundabout way when she has Noah's wife exclaim that the survivors on board the ark are not exactly the pride of humanity, seeing how they have behaved towards one another. Thus, if survival was down to merit, other people must also have survived. If not, God's plan is indeed flawed.[51]

Summary

In sum, the biblical portrayal of Noah's blind obedience is inherently difficult. The ethical problems that it poses were already noted by early interpreters, and they continue to be a problem for modern writers of fiction. While some of the authors are openly critical of Noah and his God, others explore mitigating circumstances to uphold the biblical message or change the narrative so that more people are saved. None of them, however, fully condone God's behaviour. This reluctance to accept God's act of mass destruction probably reflects the values of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Is it at all possible for a person living after the Holocaust not to condemn genocide, yet alone universal annihilation? To paraphrase the words of the post-holocaust thinker Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "no [retelling], theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of [drowning] children."[52] Even though modernity is aware of the symbolic values of ancient myths such as the flood narrative, modern retellings of the same myths betray the need to assess them critically and to problematize their value systems.[53]

The Curse of Canaan

The narrative in Gen 9:18–27 about Noah's drunkenness, nakedness, and subsequent curse of Canaan is confusing on many levels.[54] Ham sees his father's nakedness, Ham is twice declared to be Canaan's father, and Canaan is cursed (Gen 9:18, 22, cf. 10:6). This narrative is later contradicted by the statement in Gen 9:24 which narrates how Noah wakes up and discovers what "his youngest son" has done to him (וייקץ נח מיינו וידע את אשר־עשה־לו

[51] McCaughrean, *Not the End*, 159.

[52] The actual quote reads: "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."

[53] Cf. Tumanov, "All Bad," 2.

[54] For a discussion of this passage, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 151–54, and Day, *Creation to Babel*, 137–41.

בנו הקטן), a statement which seems to involve the third son Japhet rather than the second son Ham. In addition, Ham's paternity of Canaan is counter-intuitive, given that the Canaanites were clearly a Semitic people and spoke a Semitic language. From this perspective, Shem rather than Ham should be Canaan's father.[55]

These narrative problems are resolutely taken up in Provoost's novel, while Fredriksson merely hints at them. Provoost begins by changing the relative age of the brothers, making Ham the youngest, a move that is likely carried out in order to resolve the discrepancy between Gen 9:18 and 9:24. She further describes Ham as a man with two women: Re Jana, his lover and the mother of his child Canaan, and Neelata, his barren wife. There is no question of Ham's and Re Jana's parentage of Canaan, even though Re Jana is described as having had sex also with Shem and Japhet on board the ark; the problem rather concerns Canaan's illegitimacy. Following the incident with the wine, Noah curses the infant Canaan (having already blessed Ham) and asks Ham and Re Jana to leave.[56] For them, however, the curse becomes a blessing as they are given the opportunity to begin a new life elsewhere, far away from the ark and its bitter memories.

In Fredriksson's retelling, Ham is likewise a man torn between two women. Fredriksson does not set out to solve the exegetical issue of the Genesis narrative. Instead she muddies the water further by problematizing the matter of the children's parentage. She depicts Shem as homosexual and Ham as living in a complicated marriage, attracted to both his own wife and Shem's wife. In parallel, she describes a close friendship between Ham's wife and Shem

[55] As noted by, among others, David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 78, and Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6, the narrative in Gen 9:18–27, as well as the statement in Gen 9:26 about Canaan being Shem's servant, likely constitutes a justification of the Israelite conquest of Canaan.

[56] Interestingly, the notion that Noah could not curse Ham (i.e. the guilty person) but had to resort to cursing his son is found in 4Q252, part of a *pesher* on Genesis. Parts of column II lines 6–7 state that: ולא קלל את חם כי אם בנו כי ברך אל את בני נוח, i.e., as Ham had already been blessed by God (Gen 9:1), he could not now be cursed by Noah so he had to curse Canaan instead. For the full text of 4Q252, see http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx?misyzira=39201 (The Historical Dictionary Project: The Academy of the Hebrew Language). For a discussion of the text and its interpretation of the curse of Canaan, see Florentino García Martínez, "Interpretations of the Flood in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. Florentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Themes in Biblical Narrative 1; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 108.

who, due to their shared literacy, spend a lot of time together. Against this background, her declaration towards the end of the novel that Shem's newborn (nameless) son is remarkably similar to Ham's youngest son (Canaan)[57] makes the reader suspect that all is not what it seems with the parentage of Shem's (and possibly also with Ham's) son. This question reaches its peak on the last pages, yet nothing is stated explicitly. In his speech to God after the flood, Noah mentions that adultery has occurred on board the ark, thus hinting anew at the possibility that Shem's son may not in fact be his biological offspring.[58] This suspicion, in turn, makes the reader wonder whether Canaan is, in fact, a "Semitic" child or, vice versa, that Canaan and the nameless child of Shem's wife are half-brothers rather than cousins.

To sum up, in these different ways both authors interact with the contradictions and narrative gaps in Gen 9. The incident where Ham sees his naked and drunk father is redeveloped to be the tip of the iceberg, an indication of deeper and more fundamental problems between Ham, his wife, and his father.

Who Is God?

In the final form of the biblical flood story, the deity in charge is the God of Israel, called both יהוה and אלהים. He is the main character, who thinks, speaks, and acts. Read within its literary context in Genesis, it is furthermore clear that he is the creator of the universe and its supreme deity. How do the four novels portray him?

L'Engle, using the term El, stands closest to the biblical portrayal. El is the Supreme Being, served by the *seraphim* and rejected by the *nephilim*. Noah and his family worship him and he is identified by Sandy and Dennys, the two "visitors" from modern times, as the (Christian) God of the Bible. At the same time, L'Engle never spells out the extent to which the other people in the envisioned pre-flood society worship him.

Fredriksson's more complicated political narrative presents a three-part society. The Northern state, now an austere and autocratic place of terror ruled by an atheistic and insane tyrant, appears to have worshipped Noah's God before the entire priesthood was murdered. This impression is stressed by Fredriksson's use of biblical names from Noah's genealogy (Gen 5) as names of these priests. Noah himself, living in a small autonomous part,

[57] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 304, 334, 342.
[58] Fredriksson, *Syndafloden*, 214.

is a descendent of this ancient priesthood and as such has preserved its belief system. In contrast, the Southern state and its main city Eridu is modelled after ancient Sumer, and contains temples to Anu, Enlil, and Enki. Both Shem and Nin Dada, Ham's wife, are well-versed in the old Sumerian myths and treasure their wisdom. There is no polemic against the Sumerian deities, though, but neither are they invested with any power.

God does not play a big role in McCaughrean's world. McCaughrean makes clear, however, that Noah's God is a blackened version of the God of the Hebrew Bible, made evident by details such as the prohibition of drawing living beings, the demand for blood sacrifice, references to circumcision, and his demand for blind obedience.[59] The reader encounters the fanaticism and lack of empathy that he inspires in his followers, especially in Noah and his two sons, Shem and Ham, and it is not a pretty picture. The ending of the book rejects this God, and its accompanying fundamentalism and patriarchal values, in favour of hospitality and compassion displayed by the family on the "alternative ark" which Noah's family has encountered on the way.

Likewise, Provoost does not spend a lot of ink on God. She makes clear, though, that we are dealing with the God of the Hebrew Bible, evidenced especially by its references to circumcision on the final pages.[60] Most of the people around Noah and his immediate family do not seem to worship this deity, however. Re Jana and her father certainly do not, yet Re Jana is gradually coming to realize that Noah's God is significantly more powerful than her own deities. Provoost furthermore depicts Noah's society as primitive, in contrast to the higher civilization in the marshlands along the river from where Re Jana and her father come. In this sense, like Fredriksson, Provoost hints at ancient Mesopotamia, and a belief system that differs from that of Noah.

Looking at all four novels together, it is both striking and at the same time inevitable, given their decision to follow the overarching storyline of the

[59] These references are anachronistic insofar as they introduce practices into the flood story which, according to the inner-biblical story-line, God has yet to command. As a result, the Noah of the retelling is turned into an Israelite, in contrast to the Noah of the biblical narrative who is a man living prior to God's choice of Abraham and his descendants and their ensuing covenant relationship (Gen 17:7).

[60] Provoost, *Shadow of the Ark*, 360. As above, this reference is anachronistic insofar as the custom of circumcision is introduced only later in the biblical narrative about Abraham (Gen 17:10–11). It is, of course, possible that Provoost here is referring not to the mark of the covenant which appears in the biblical *narrative* but instead to a *historical* ancient Near Eastern practice.

biblical *Vorlage*, that they all *must* assign the ultimate power to Noah's God. In the words of Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, "their refutation of the canonical account is simultaneously an embrace of it."[61] The flood *will* come and it is Noah's God who is sending it. This fact serves, in a sense, to destabilize their critical standpoint. Regardless of Re Jana's feelings towards the Builder and his god, as portrayed in Provoost's novel, she cannot escape his power. McCaughrean tries to avoid the same conclusion on the very last pages of her book by describing the flood as a recurring natural phenomenon, yet this reading ultimately takes the plot apart as it leaves the reader wondering how Noah knew to build the ark in the first place.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of four select retellings of the biblical flood narrative has cast a spotlight upon many of the ethical and moral issues that this account raises for modern readers. These issues are already present in the biblical narrative; what the novels do is bring them out into the open. Beginning with the *nephilim*, these characters play different roles in the retellings, ranging from being evil creatures on par with the serpent in Gen 3, to being representatives of a (in many ways superior) pre-fall creation. Notably, however, no retelling assigns to them the ultimate reason as to why God decided to send the flood, as implied in the final form of Genesis by the proximity of Gen 6:1–4 to the flood narrative. Turning to Noah's reaction to God's news about the coming flood, all retellings problematize Noah's apparent blind obedience by either openly criticizing his passivity or turning him into a more pro-active character. Along similar lines, all retellings, although to a varying degree, are clearly uncomfortable with God's decision to destroy the world and express doubts about not only the justice but also the achievements of the flood. Did the pre-flood generation really commit a sin large enough to justify their punishment, and how likely is it really that the post-flood humanity would be an improvement? Fewer novels interact with the narrative problems in the account in Gen 9 about Noah's curse upon Canaan, yet those that do tend to speculate about Ham's relative age vis-à-vis his brothers, his paternity of Canaan, and his attitude towards Noah's decision to build the ark. Finally, all novels, given their decision to adhere to the biblical storyline, create a deity that is omnipotent and, as a result, not wholly good. This

[61] Stahlberg, "Refuse," 37.

is an age-old theological conundrum and all the novels compromise God's goodness in favour of upholding his omnipotence. He sent the flood but it was not a good thing to do.