

**HUMAN COMPLICITY IN FLOOD OCCURRENCE: AN
AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICAL READING OF
GENESIS 6:5-8:22**

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Abstract

Man, since living in communities, has sought ways and means of production and infrastructural development for himself. However, these developments and means of production have not always been done in such a way that the ecology is sustained. There have been so many interventions that have sought to address this issue. Many of these interventions have come from the scientific and social scientific disciplines. Very little has been done and even sought to address this issue of sustainable development from the arts. This paper is restricted to the worldviews of African Christians who have accepted certain erroneous readings of the Bible that have touted humanity as the centre of creation and have therefore espoused values that deplete the resources that have been made available to humanity in creation. It seeks to pursue a reader centred reader-response reading of Genesis 6:5-8:22. This reading will take seriously our African setting and worldview. It is hoped that this sort of reading will demonstrate that a careful reading of the Bible by African Christians who take seriously African religious and cultural worldviews and values will enable us to be more responsible in the way we live. It has been found that Africans and other critical readings of the Bible share the same religious and cultural values of treating the earth with respect. This paper shows that the “flood” is caused by human actions and floods that do occur today should remind us that we are to change the way we treat the earth and its resources that are available to us.

Introduction

Historical records available indicate that the earliest settlement of humans in communities was necessitated by the need to find sources of livelihood. After, humans could no longer chase their game and gather

their crops and return to their places of abode under hangings of rocks and in caves, humans settled in communities and began to domesticate animals and farm for their food. This was the beginning of agricultural development.

Today, many Africans would prefer to be regarded as Muslim or Christian rather than think of themselves as Africans. Thus, they ascribe to the tenets of the Qur'an and Bible to the neglect of the virtues and values of African Traditional Religion. Although, these persons are Africans by birth and up-bringing, their worldview and way of life are equal to that of foreigners on the continent of Africa.

In Africa, there has been a certain regard of the earth that causes inhabitants to have reverence for the earth. This also informed how Africans treated the earth and its resources that are placed at their disposal. It is sad to note that this notion of showing respect for the earth was seen by non-Africans as sacrilegious. This and many other values of the African were denigrated by missionary Christianity. In their place, European worldview and values were substituted. However, the European substitutes did not have solid basis in the life of the African. In the words of Colin M. Turnbull, a westerner:

In the towns, there is virtually no belief, only a way of life that the majority accept. There is no belief because in being forced to abandon beliefs, in being taught scepticism, even shame, for tribal ways, the African has learned to be equally sceptical of western beliefs and ways. He behaves as he does because of convenience or from expediency.¹

Turnbull continues, "Values disintegrate because the old values, which were not so very different from our own, were based on tribal lore that is now considered by the sophisticated African to be part of his regrettable savage past".² This shows that the African only accepted at face value what the European gave him or her.

The tracing of some of these past ills of Westerners is important here because some of our present-day African problems are due to the way Westerners sought to "civilize" us in Africa. The facts cannot be brushed aside that with the advent of Westerners on our soil, they sought to uproot every conceivable thing and replace them with their own. Specifically to the topic under review, are issues that have caused Africans to depart from the tried and tested values that have worked for

them over the years. Patrick Marnham, a British journalist is quoted to have said this of the African situation:

For the outsider who enters Africa, the governing dream has always been to change the place. The models for such change have been drawn from the North, that is, from the nations of Europe, Asia and America that lie between the 35th and 60th parallels – where the corn comes from...³

Marnham confesses of the failure of these westerners thus, “As the North penetrated Africa, it has proved less and less capable of learning from experience.”⁴ It is significant to note that the more the experiments from these “experts” fail, the more they impress upon African governments to use more of their pre-packaged solution and the more the earth’s resources are depleted. It is in the light of these “solutions” that rather seem to create more problems for us that this paper proposes a re-reading of Genesis 6:5-8:22 from an African perspective; a perspective that takes into consideration traditional worldviews and values that had helped our forebears to sustain life before the advent of the Europeans and European solution to our problems. However, there is the need to have a brief understanding of the ‘Reader’ before dwelling on the proposed reading.

Causes of Flood

A flood is an overflow of water that submerges or "drowns" land. Plate 1 and 2 are example of flooded lands. The European Union (EU) Floods Directive defines a flood as a covering by water of land not normally covered by water. In the sense of "flowing water", the word may also be applied to the inflow of the tide.⁵

Flood is overflow of the huge amount of water onto the normally dry land. Flood occurs when the overflowing water submerges land and causes deluge. It is a cruel and violent expression of water. Floods are often deadly, damaging and devastating. They kill lots of people, damage house and crops, and cause extensive destruction. In broader terms, floods are of two types, based on causes; Natural and human floods.⁶ While the natural causes include high rainfall, snowmelt (because of global warming), relief (lowlands) and coastal flooding, human/anthropogenic causes of floods include deforestation, poor farming methods,

overgrazing, over-cultivation, poor water management and population pressure.

The Reader

By the reader, this paper refers to the interpreter of the text. It is known that anyone who picks a piece of literature and reads it is a reader. However, the trained African biblical scholar is refereed to here. This person has been trained to read the Bible critically. An African here does not necessarily mean a person of African origin or even born in Africa, but the person who is informed about African worldview and can truly represent those worldviews in his or her interpretation.

From the above therefore, the reader is an informed person who can be considered a true representative of Africa. Therefore, this person is a conglomerate of all that Africa is. In this paper, this reader (i.e., this African) is a mixture of tradition and modernity in religion and culture. This African has to have a serious dialogue with the biblical text. What is meant here is that this African does not merely accept anything of the worldviews of Africa and the Bible as sacrosanct. He or she has the right to resist that which his or her modern upbringing does not allow him or her to accept as a fact.⁷ In an earlier article, it had been said that the African may have a contrary position from the text that he or she is reading.⁸ In such a situation, there is the need for negotiation as to which position must prevail. This is where the dialogue is at its best. It is this African who takes the Bible, reads it and makes meaning out of it for the good of the continent.

Methodology

African biblical hermeneutics is a reader centred reader-response criticism. In this study the reader is recognized as the most important component in reading meaning out of texts. Without the reader, there can be no meaning. In essence, the study acknowledges and accepts that there is subjectivity in the reading process. This is very important especially for the reading of the Bible. In this process therefore, there is the need for a dialogue between the reader and the text. The reader comes to the text with all that he or she is and has. With all these, the reader interacts with the text. This dialogue presupposes “a give and take” process. The outcome of this interaction/dialogue is the meaning that is made from reading the text. This sort of reading brings alive the written word of the Bible to the context of the reader. It is this proposed reading that is done in this paper. The modern African reader does not

give accent to everything that is preserved for us in the Hebrew Scriptures. He or she resists things in the text that have been frozen in the primitive origins of the Hebrew Scripture. In making meaning of the ancient text, the African reader also resists obsolete views in his/her own African traditions. In short, the reading here may be seen as “reading against the grain” – a refutation of some traditional views.

This study is not interested in the sources that produced the text under review. This means that it does not consider the history behind the text. It means neither the sources that produced the text nor the history that the text may presumably represent are brought into this interpretation. Rather, it acknowledges the fact that although, a text may have a history that can reveal the sources that culminated in its composition; its emphasis is on meaning that can be extracted from the final canonical text. Thus, it is this canonical – received – text that this study deals with and seeks to interpret.

Refutation of Sources

The chosen text – Gen 6:5-8:22 – deals with the flood narrative of what has been described as the primordial period in the Pentateuch. Traditionally, this text has been seen to be a combination of the Yahwist and the Priestly sources into a composite whole. Thus, earlier dominant interpretive tools have sought to read the text under review from the point of view of the constituent sources therein. In that process, two main issues took centre stage in the interpretation. These are (1) the use of the divine names, and (2) the number of animals that were taken into the ark. This paper addresses these two issues isolated here in order to establish that the text is a composite whole and address the above issues. The study also shows human complicity in the biblical flood story, so that we take more proactive steps to curb and ultimately reverse our destruction of the ecology

As earlier said, this has been read many times by literary critics over the years as a text that is composed from two different sources – the Yahwist and the Priestly documents. Primarily, the division has been based on the use of the divine names: Yahweh and Elohim. Here, the distinction is so nebulous. Indeed, to merely use the divine names to distinguish between sources is a very difficult endeavour and the outcome is not without doubt. Thus, the usage of the divine is not helpful here. Bernhard W. Anderson, for example, has cautioned that this argument needs to be re-examined because there are instances in which the writer

has alternated the divine names and at other times, even combined them as hyphenated name.⁹ In the light of the methodological problems involved in the usage of the divine names for distinguishing the sources, we think it is proper to abandon the process altogether.

Two prominent biblical scholars, E. A. Speiser and Claus Westermann among others, have conceded that the narrative of the flood in Genesis is a composite narrative. However, they both showed the sources that have been brought together to constitute this narrative. Speiser writes, “The received biblical account of the Flood is beyond reasonable doubt a composite narrative, reflecting more than one separate source.”¹⁰ In his comprehensive commentary on Genesis 1-11, Claus Westermann also painted a picture that suggests this text can be read as a composite whole. However, while the work literary critics, that sought to find the sources that produced the text, has served its purpose, the method seems to have been overworked. The critics do not agree on the division of the text into the various sources.¹¹ Thus, as Fokkelman has pointed out, the task of literary critics in identifying sources is “an unattainable ideal”. Fokkelman, therefore proposed a severing of the final text from its sources.¹² It is believed that Speiser and Westermann would have done themselves a better service by following their hunches and stuck to interpreting a composite text, instead of trying to identify the sources that were used to compose it.

The other point that has been used to distinguish between sources of Genesis 6:5-8:22 is the number of animals that were saved in the flood. It has been said that while P says Noah was commanded to take two of each animal, J said he was to take seven pairs of each animal. This is a matter of translation. The point of contention is the Hebrew word **š^enayim** which has been translated as two. It is important to note that **š^enayim** is one word that is commonly used for items that come in pairs. Therefore, it is usually translated as two, pair or twin. In this passage, **š^enayim** has been consistently translated as two by the New Revised Version and the New King James Version. However, the New American Bible translated **š^enayim š^enayim** as “two by two” in Gen 7:9, but as pairs in 7:15, while the New International Version translated the **š^enayim š^enayim** pairs in both Gen 7:9 and 15. In a couple of cases, this might not have done justice to the canonizers who accepted the final stage of the text. In the light of the entire narrative, **š^enayim** should be read as pairs in Gen 6:19-20. What has been done traditionally has been to translate words in particular ways. Thus, it is believed that it was this that gave rise to the literary source criticism and vice versa. However, if **š^enayim** is translated

as pairs, it would be clear that the writer in Gen 6:19-20 was giving a general command of animals that Noah was to take with him into the ark, while Gen 7:2-3 gives the details of the various types of animals that he was to take and what he finally did in Gen 7:15.

The Interpretation of the Reading

In the area of interpretation of the text one is confronted with two poles of the problem at stake: God's action and human complicity. In other words, God was motivated to take action in response to human action – sin. These two are always in contention. It is the case of the chicken and the egg issue. Which comes first, is it the action of humanity that causes God to act? Or is it God who acts and his action is perceived to be a reaction to an earlier human action - wickedness. This paper however, has gone from the greater to the lesser – from the act of God to the act of humanity.

1. **Acts of God:** It has rightly been recognised that the flood narrative is very closely related to the creation narrative.¹³ It has long been recognized that the flood narrative in Genesis is similar to that found in the ancient Near East, especially that of Mesopotamia. However, as Nahum Sarna has pointed out, there is no evidence from the science of geology to support the notion that “the earth submerged, wholly or in large part, by flood waters.”¹⁴ Yet, most of the commentaries have related the interpretation of this narrative to the Mesopotamian flood narrative, as if that could prove the historicity of the flood narrative in the Genesis text. Thus, what this study has as interpretations of this narrative have been very theological in approach. They have assumed that what is written needs merely to be interpreted as it is. This seems to be erroneous. For, to say that the Bible says that God caused the earth to be flooded, so God did it is not an interpretation of the text. That is repeating or restating what is found in the text.

However, when we move to what the narrator means by God causing the earth to be flood then we are in the realm of interpretation. It has long been recognised that natural occurrences of great magnitude are attributed to God and the flood narrative under consideration is one such an occurrence. When Sarna wrote his commentary on Genesis, he conceded this fact. He wrote: “Religious man saw in these upheavals of nature the activity of the divine and attributes their cause to man's angering of the gods. Most frequently, one man and his family, the favourite of the gods,

survived the deluge to father a new human race.”¹⁵ He continued, “Whatever historical foundations may possibly underlie such traditions, it is clear that popular imagination has been at work magnifying local floods into catastrophes of universal proportions.”¹⁶ However, when it came to interpreting the narrative, he abandoned this notion altogether and stuck to the traditional way of relating it to the Mesopotamian flood narrative. This narrative must have been written from the worldview of the narrator concerning occurrences of natural disasters of great magnitude. It is from this worldview that the events have been projected unto God.

The passage begins with God recognising that something was wrong with humanity. After the creation of humanity and God had declared that it was very good, things began to deteriorate. The Earthling – *hā^{ad}dāmāh* – the one from the earth (*’ādām*) and his wife disobeyed God. Later, Cain killed his brother Abel. In the text here, the sin of humanity has increased to such an extent that God could no longer tolerate the sin of humanity (Gen 6:5). The narrator tells the story from a survivor’s point of view. The narrator tells of God’s intention – God planned to wipe out humanity from the face of the earth. This action would have made God look like a failure. Humanity that God had declared as crown of his creation has become abysmal flop (cf. Gen 1:31). However, the narrator does not want to paint God as an abysmal failure. Thus, a way was found for the perpetuity of humanity on earth. God found someone who was righteous and showed him favour. Noah, whose name means soothing or pleasant, was reckoned as righteous and perfect among his peers *tsadīq tāmīm b^edorotaw* (6:9). It is not said that acts of Noah made him be reckoned as righteous. Thus, God then reveals his plans to Noah after he had been declared as righteous. It is clear that this story is told from point of view of one reflecting on the past.

There is no indication that the rest of humanity was aware of the plans of God in this destruction. Then in the typical biblical format of repetition, the words of the narrator are put into God’s mouth to Noah as regards what he was to do to escape from the impending flood. God then puts the same intention into action. Although, it is said that it was Noah who was found to be worthy, he and his family as well as a selection of all living creatures were also to be saved. The narrative gives a massive occurrence of the floods as if the waters came from both the abyss and in the form of torrential rain (Gen 7:11 cf, Gen 1:6-10; 7:12). This is inexplicable and thus flood is attributed to God.

This is the way religious persons perceive reality. When bad occurrences of a great magnitude happen to Africans, and indeed all religious peoples, they resort to think that there is something that they might have done wrong. Thus, the event is seen as a response by God to deal with the “sin” of the people. In the present case of the flood in the biblical narrative, the writer wishes to put the occurrence of the flood in context. The specific actions of humanity were not given. Africans always ascribe the cause of any negative event on someone. Among most African people, the cause of events such as floods was seen as the demonstration of God’s anger.¹⁷ It suffices for the writer to make that assertion. This assertion presupposes that the act is due to the wickedness of humanity. Thus, the writer sets the stage for the subsequent events. The wickedness of humanity was very great to such an extent that God is caused to react. The biblical writer therefore, says that due to the extent of the wickedness of humanity, God regretted that he had created humanity and decided to wipe humanity off the surface of the earth. However, this bid at exterminating humanity is linked to the extermination of other creatures of God. This does not make sense. What have the other creatures of God done to be exterminated? However, the method that God intends to use would invariably kill those creatures anyway. Thus, what has been ascribed to God here is a consequence of what would happen to other creatures for the action of God. Again, what has been said as the reason for the extermination of the animals – that they had corrupted their way on earth – is an explanation of the happened as a result of the flood. In short, all that have been said is an explanation, in anthropomorphic terms, of what normally happens after floods. Those who escape are deemed to have been saved by God and those who die in the floods are deemed to have been punished for their sins. For example, it is known from the Bavenda of South Africa that whenever there is a flood, they attributed it to some sins that their chiefs might have committed against God.¹⁸ However, when the floods occur it is not necessarily the chief who dies in the process. This would mean that the consequences of the actions of one person may affect others who may be innocent.

The foregoing is a reflection and an explanation why events such as the flood so described occurred. Africans have held this view for the longest time that such events are caused by God due to some “sin” of the people. Recently, Rick Osborne also pointed out that the Wikipedia has defined “Act of God” as “a legal term for events outside of human

control, such as sudden floods or other natural disasters, for which no one can be held responsible. In other words, if it is not understood and/or no humans can be blamed for it, then God must have done it.”¹⁹ This is the same notion that Sarna had said.²⁰ It is this sort of understanding that has given rise to the narrative at hand. In this process, the animals that were saved were understood to have been determined by God to be saved. After the flood, Noah offered a sacrifice in thanksgiving to God. God was said to have accepted the sacrifice. Again, the rainbow that appeared after rainfall is interpreted by the narrator as a sign by which God bound himself not to cause any such floods again. How come there continue to be floods in our world? The problem is, are these interpretations correct and sustainable? It does seem to be difficult to sustain these sort of interpretations that are based on erroneous story line. The worldview that produced the text must be interpreted rightly first before the correct meaning is extracted.

It does seem that even those who ascribe to the world as a creation of God must understand that God has already put into the creation the laws that govern it. Thus, when these laws are violated, then events occur that affect humans adversely. If this stance is correct, then human complicity can be assessed in flood narrative under consideration.

2. **Human Complicity:**

Human complicity was seen as the motivation that caused God to react. The text begins with the recognition that the cause of the flood was a reaction to human action. It reads, “Then Yahweh saw that the wickedness of humanity was great, and he devised of his heart only evil all the time” (6:5). It is not clear from the passage what it was that humans did that was appalling to God. One is tempted to say that whatever humans did were not acts that could be reckoned as moral sins. The actions of humans here may be a violation of physical laws concerning their own lives. The two Hebrew words used in connection with human actions here, **šht** – corrupt and **hms** – violent, need not be moral acts. The study concedes that these refer to violations of physical laws. Such violations have also consequences as moral sins do. It does seem that humans have not learned from our past mistakes.

One needs not be a geographer or hydrologist to see that the greater part of coastal towns and cities along West Africa, at least from Ghana to Nigeria, are at risk of getting flooded with any tidal wave of ten feet and above. In Accra, the capital city of Ghana, any rain that lasts more than two hours is likely to cause floods. A lot of houses have been built on

water-ways, and natural wet-lands are being filled daily. Some of these are clear misunderstanding of the environment, our management of the ecology and abuse of the natural habitat that takes cognisance of the ecology. Local and municipal authorities say nothing about these abuses and acts based on our misunderstanding of the ecology until the floods actually come after rains. The relevant authorities talk for so long as the rainy season lasts and they go back to sleep until the next rainy season begins. These sort of cyclical acts of omission and commission have been with us over the years that one wonders whether our authorities know what they are to do in their various offices. Could the flood narrative under consideration not have been one such human set-back?

Conclusion

It is clear from the narrative under consideration that the story is a myth – a creation of the narrator – to explain what happens when floods of great magnitude occur. In such cases, victims are deemed to have been punished for their “sins”, while survivors are deemed to have been saved by God. In such cases, stories are even created as to how God guided them through the floods. However, since we do not face the consequences of our actions, but resign everything to the cause of God, we stand the danger of failing every time. The floods that have been occurring in our various countries every year are not caused by our “moral sins” as they are by our “physical sins.” Religious persons who are adherents of the Bible need to wake up from their sleep and take responsibility for their actions and encourage others to follow them in that direction. This is the only way by which we shall save ourselves and the environment around us.

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