

*"The fire next time..."*

# NOAH AND THE NUCLEAR RAINBOW

by Arthur Waskow

In the last few centuries the conventional assumption of both modern secularists and the religious communities has been that our world is too new, our problems too unprecedented, for the ancient systems of religious thought and practice to be useful. I am proposing exactly the opposite approach: That precisely *because* our world is so new, we must draw on the ancient wisdoms.

We might test this approach against the one fact of our lives that is the most radically unprecedented: that the survival of the human race is in danger, and even the survival of all life on earth is in serious question. How could there emerge from ancient religious traditions that are rooted in a world of firewood and olive oil, spears and chariots, any useful answers to this unprecedented possibility?

It is with a shock that we remember that among the most ancient tales of these ancient traditions is a story that explicitly raises the possibility, the imminent danger, that all life on earth could be destroyed. The story is the story of the Flood, of Noah's Ark, of the Rainbow. That the "ultramodern" possibility of life-extinction is dealt with in the Bible is so shocking, in fact, that perhaps we should pause before we look at the story itself to absorb the shock and speculate how the story could have come to be there.

The conventional answer of the premodern communities of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others who were rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures was that the Flood happened just as the Book of Genesis describes it: forty days of rain, a wooden ship, and so on. But the past five hundred years of modern science and modern historical and literary analysis of the Bible have made almost all of us incapable of believing that a literal flood or rain wiped out almost all life on earth. Yet there the story sits. Why?

The story could have been a grandiose expansion of a local event—a catastrophic flood in Babylonia, perhaps, which destroyed the local culture and left behind an indelible memory that "our whole world was wiped out."

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Or the story could have been a profound survival, a poetic rendering, of one of the cataclysmic wrenchings of the earth's fabric that we now know have several times radically reduced the number of species on our planet.

Or the story could have been an expression of deep fear—not at all a memory of the past, but the surfacing of an ultimate imagination of the ultimate danger. If we fear sometimes that the very earth beneath our feet will give way—that our known world of family, culture, civilization, and even habitat will go to pieces—then this story is the most radical expression of that fear. An archetype, not history.

Or the story could have been a projection into the outer worlds of society and nature of a deep psychological fear of the disintegration of the very self—in overflowing madness, or in death.

Or the story may have been the result of several or all of these. It may have expressed the simultaneous "truths" that the vibrant life of the human spirit, of human history, and even of the natural world is always risking death.

We do not even have to choose among these different possible understandings of the story in order to learn from what it says. Or, perhaps, each of us will have to choose one understanding, but that need not prevent us from sharing with others who have chosen another understanding. All we have to know at this point is that we share some awe and some excitement at finding a tale of universal extinction tucked away in a literature so ancient that extinction was not possible—and that we share some desire to see whether the ancient tale casts some light on our radically new predicament.

## THE ALL-BURNING

In a nutshell: The story explains that violence, corruption, ruin were rampant on the earth. God, seeing that the human imagination is profoundly evil, determines to destroy all life—except a select human family led by Noah, and at least a pair of every species of all life. God rains disaster on the earth, killing everything except those who take refuge with Noah on the Ark. One year later, the waters subside so that these refugees can emerge. And then God, asserting again that the human imagination is profoundly evil, now sees this fact as a reason to promise that the cycles of life will never be destroyed again, to insist that new rules of behavior must govern human action in the

future, and to give the Rainbow as a sign of this covenant.

Now what can we make of this story that will help us deal with the question of preserving life on earth from nuclear destruction? One lesson seems fairly obvious: The human race, through Noah and his family, is made responsible to preserve all life. The first "species preservation act" is not the one passed by the United States Congress in 1977; it is the command of God to Noah. Indeed, perhaps the ethical coloration which that command gave to all of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought became an element in what moved the Congress to protect all species, even those of no known economic or biological use to mankind. Today we know that there is no Ark large and varied enough to preserve all the species that live upon the earth—except Earth itself. No fallout shelter, no hollowed-out command post under the Rocky Mountains, no cave filled with microfilmed corporate records can carry out *that* task. So the story pushes us in the direction of accepting conscious responsibility to preserve the Earth as a whole.

Secondly, the story lays that great responsibility at the door of a fairly ordinary human being. Noah is no expert. He is not an expert on rain, or on ships, or on animals. He is simply a reasonably righteous person—and some of the later commentators on the Bible conclude that he is not even extraordinarily righteous. Today there are some who say that in order to deal with the danger of thermonuclear extinction one must be an expert—an expert in physics, or military strategy, or diplomacy, or economics, or social psychology, or world politics. But the Noah story teaches a different lesson. It teaches that any of us who regard ourselves as simply reasonably decent people are obligated to act.

Now let us dig a little deeper. When I first began to explore this story, the question in my head was how to prevent thermonuclear war. It took a while of puzzling over the story to notice that it never uses the category, the imagery, of "war." Somehow, confronting the danger of universal destruction, the story does not want to call it "war." Why not?

The human race is used to war. We know, from thousands of years of history, how to live with wars. We know they can be won or lost. We know that even winning them is often sad and destructive, and losing them can be disastrous. But there we are: winners and losers. Nowadays people have begun to say that in a thermonuclear war there would be no winners; but we have not yet absorbed that in a thermonuclear war there might be no losers. In such a situation, the very category "war" is misleading, and to use it is to fool ourselves.

Again: Many human philosophic and religious traditions (including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and such modern ideologies as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism) have worked out doctrines of "just" and "unjust" war. Indeed, much of the recent religious awakening to the need for resisting and reversing the nuclear arms race is based on the application of the doctrine of "just war" to nuclear war and comes to the conclusion that no nuclear war can be a just one. Yet there is a more profound question, and the story of the Flood puts that question to us: Can the categories of "justice" and "injustice" remain relevant when the human community itself, in which and through which justice and injustice have reality, disappears? Does even the concept of an unjust war fail to convey the truth of

thermonuclear extinction?

And again: We have learned from our histories that most of the time—not always, but mostly—when war occurs, that side wins which has more plentiful and more powerful weapons than its opponent. That knowledge is what pushes us into an arms race, a knowledge deeply intertwined with the whole notion of war. It is hard, within that structure of thought, to come to grips with the idea that there may be a kind of weapon with which, after we cross a certain threshold, "more" and "more powerful" do not matter.

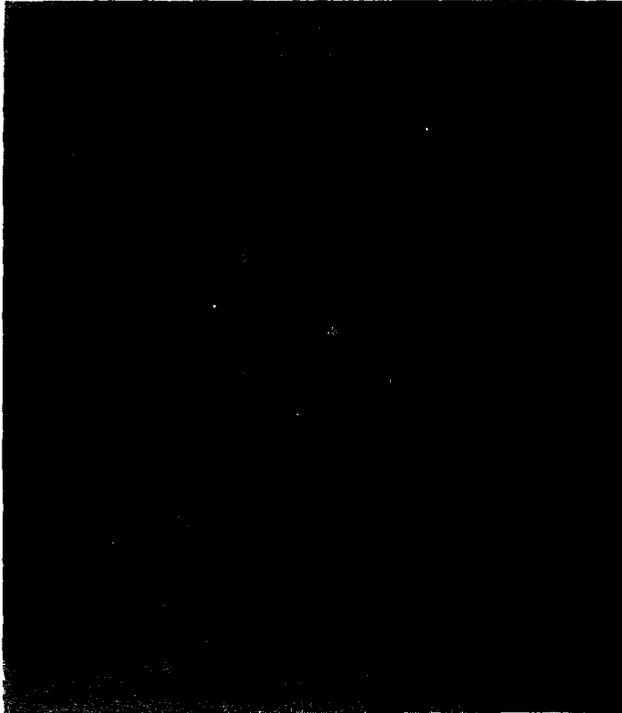
So now we may see in a new light the absence of the concept "war" from the story of the Flood. For the Flood afflicted us all. It cut across all political and geographical boundaries. We were not pitted one nation or one people against another: It was reality itself that overwhelmed us. The violence, the corruption, the ruination of the earth were taking place within *every* nation, *every* people, perhaps *every* species. Our own violence, our own corruption, our own ruination overflowed. They rose to flood stage. It was our own behavior that led to our destruction; but the disaster was not a war.

Today, the Physicians for Social Responsibility have grasped this lesson when they talk about "the last epidemic." For an epidemic, too, cuts across all boundaries. When we search in the story of the Flood for more accurate language than "war" to describe our danger, perhaps we should pay attention to an ancient commentary on the story that has come into a modern spiritual. Long ago the commentators said that God had left open the danger of a Flood of Fire. As the Southern black song puts it, "God gave Noah the Rainbow Sign: No more water. The fire next time!" If we try to put in convenient English this image of the Flood of Fire, there is a word that is close at hand: the Holocaust, literally the All-Burning. So let us come closer to the truth by saying that we face not thermonuclear war but thermonuclear holocaust. Let us come closer to the truth by saying not "50,000 weapons" or "50,000 H-bombs" when we talk about that stockpile of nuclear explosives, but "50,000 pieces of the center of the sun, flung head-long on the surface of the earth." Or "50,000 portable Auschwitzes." Even that may be misleading, for even in Auschwitz there was an outside world that at last liberated and healed the survivors. If 50,000 stars are ever flung upon the surface of the earth, there will be no outside world that can free and heal the survivors.

So let us try to learn the lesson about language—and therefore about action—that the story of the Flood is trying to teach us.

### HOLY RHYTHMS

And then let us uncover the next layer of the story, one that is even more unexpected than its teaching about war. The story is almost obsessed with time and dates. The date when the rain began to fall is specified as "the seventeenth day of the second month." How long the rain lasted, the date when the waters stopped their rising, the date when dry ground first appeared, the date when the Ark landed—all are specified. So is the date when at last its passengers could disembark and receive the Rainbow Covenant. That date is the "twenty-seventh day of the second month"—one lunar year plus eleven days after the Flood began, which means that from start to finish the disaster took exactly one solar year.



"Noah and the Rainbow," by William Blake (c. 1802), from the Houghton Library Collection, Harvard University.

This exactitude with which all these dates are given is still more surprising when we consider that these are the only dates that are specified in all the Book of Genesis. From the Creation straight through till the Exodus from Egypt the Bible gives no dates except those connected with the Flood: no date for the Tower of Babel, or Abraham's departure from the town of Ur, or the Binding of Isaac, or Jacob's wrestle with God, or Joseph's accession to power in Egypt. Only these.

Indeed, these dates have never been used in the life-practice of any religious community. They have not been used as the date of the Exodus is used in Passover, as the dates of the Crucifixion and Resurrection are used in Good Friday and Easter, as the date of rededication of the Temple is used in Hanukkah. These dates needed to be used because to the religious communities it was crucial for every generation to reexperience the Exodus from Egypt, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the rededication of the Temple. But the dates of the Flood and the Rainbow never needed to be used—because no generation ever faced the practical possibility that all life might be destroyed.

Until our own generation. And now, drawing from this ancient story, some communities began in 1982 and 1983 to observe and celebrate the moment of disaster and the moment of renewal: the date of the Flood and the date of the Rainbow. These observances drew on that underlying

life-practice of the biblically rooted religious paths which insists on using liturgy to mark the rhythms of time. Liturgies at birth, puberty, marriage, and death as well as at the turning points of the month and year require Jews, Christians, and Muslims to face basic life-issues over and over again: How should we act toward freedom and slavery, life and death, good and evil, joy and suffering?

Indeed, the sense of life-cycle and of holy rhythms in time that were expressed in these observances sprang from a deeper aspect of the Noah story. For the Flood story teaches that affirmation of the cycles of life is crucial to preventing the death of life.

How do we learn this? When the Flood begins, the normal cycles halt. The Bible says that just before the rain began to fall, there were seven days of waiting. The rabbis teach that during those seven days the sun rose in the West and set in the East. In other words, the seven days of Creation were being run backward—and so the sun reversed itself. During the time on the Ark—exactly one solar year—the rabbis also say that all the animals and humans on the Ark refrained from sex—refrained from initiating the life-cycle. When Noah wanted to test out the dry land, he tried to restart the great cycles of night and day, death and life: First he sent out a raven—black as the night, named *arva*, like *erev*, the "evening"—and then he sent out the dove—white as the morning, named *yonah*, like *yom*, the "day." The raven, bird of carrion, cleared the earth of the dead carcasses that were the end-product of the last life-cycle before the Flood. The dove brought back for food the olive branch, the first new life that had sprung up after the great disaster.

Noah's pleading for renewal of the cycles won God's approval and response. In the Rainbow Covenant, God gives the promise of renewing and preserving life by mentioning precisely the cycles of life.

Never again will I doom the earth...  
Never again will I destroy all life...  
So long as the earth endures,  
Seedtime and harvest,  
Cold and heat,  
Summer and winter,  
Day and night,  
Shall not cease.  
...This is the sign that I set  
For the covenant between Me and you  
And every living creature with you,  
For the generations forever:  
I have set my bow in the clouds.

Now it is we who hold the fiery bow of destruction in our hand, for the H-bomb *is* the Rainbow—shattered. In a world that thinks meditation and celebration a waste of time, the H-bomb is inevitable. The story of the Flood and Rainbow remind us that we must renew the cycles, renew our celebration of them—in order to live. .WV.