

# “The Restful Waters of Noah”:

## מי נח—מי מנחות

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The Flood narrative is dominated by the terrifying picture of a whole world covered by rising water with only Noah's ark remaining afloat. This picture comprises side by side the two basic poles of this tale: as against the destruction brought about by the Flood, the ark warrants the continued existence of mankind and the animal world. This inherent polarity also comes to the fore in an exilic prophecy, in which the Deluge is styled מי נח (Isa. 54:9):

כי-מי נח זאת לי  
אשר נשבעתי מעבר מי נח עוד על הארץ  
כן נשבעתי מקצף עליך ומגער בך

For as the “waters”<sup>1</sup> of Noah is this to Me:

As I have sworn that the waters of Noah will no more come over the earth,

So have I sworn that I will not be wroth with you nor rebuke you.

The reassurance that God will no longer persist in His anger is validated by the allusion to the divine oath, holding that the Flood will not return.<sup>2</sup> The prophet applies the Flood narrative to the situation of his generation: the Deluge itself symbolizes the exile; Noah who alone of all mankind survived, parallels the surviving exiles.<sup>3</sup>

The unique appellation “waters of Noah” is worth consideration. As the name מי נח has the connotation of “rest,” the phrase מי נח is close to the collocation מי מנחות in the well-known colon: על מי מנחות ינהלני (“He leads me along still waters,” Ps. 23:2).<sup>4</sup> Its links with the traditional rhetorical register are indicated by the

1. MT כי-מי נח (Leningrad B19A and Aleppo Codex); כימי נח according to the Cairo Codex, Codex Petropolitensis, and a minority of the MSS adduced by Kennicott; so also Yedidya Norzi, *Minhath Sha'i*; Tg. Jon.: כיומי נח = Aq., Symm., Theod., Vulg., Pesh.; for details, see apparatus IV of the last volume of M. H. Goshen-Gottstein's *Isaiah* edition in the Hebrew University Bible Project, as well as C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoreto-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (repr.: New York, 1966), 219–20. The LXX reads ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος τοῦ ἐπὶ Νῶε (ממי נח). In v. 9b the minus of מי נח in the LXX is a condensation on the part of the translator. A plausible defense of the semi-conjecture מי נח is offered by M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), 352, n. 96, on the basis of the pattern כן . . . כאשר in the remainder of this verse; it is partly supported by the fact that the LXX does not reflect כי but a single graph. The reading כי could have arisen under the influence of its frequent use in the context (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6).

2. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 374.

3. For similar applications, see Isa. 55:3 (corroborated by the metaphor of 55:10–11); 51:2–3.

4. On the relation between this picture and the other metaphors in the imagery of Psalm 23, see F. H. Polak, “‘The Lord Is My Shepherd; I Shall not Want’ (Ps. xxiii:1): On Interpretation and Poetics

Akkadian parallel *mû nêhûtu*, “still waters,” e.g., *ina me-e né-ĥu-ti lu-u gi-šal-li at-ta* in a Sumerio-Akkadian incantation (“in still waters be thou an oar to me”).<sup>5</sup> This text is the more significant as the poet also mentions *me-e šap-lu-ti* (“deep waters”)—storm and a ship not knowing in which harbor to land (cf. the metaphor of Ps. 107:25–30). Thus, the phrase נח מל has reassuring overtones as against the despair of the exiles.<sup>6</sup> The horrors of the Flood are neutralized by the connotation of stability inherent in the idea of “rest.”

In the Flood narrative itself the notion of “rest,” as evoked by the name Noah, is quite prominent. In the Mesopotamian tradition, the verb *nâĥu* occurs in the description of the end of the Flood in table XI of the Gilgamesh Epic (l. 131):<sup>7</sup>

<i>inûĥ tâmtu</i>	The sea grew quiet,
<i>ušĥarrir imĥullû</i>	The storm abated,
<i>abûbu iklû</i>	The hurricane ceased.

By the same token, according to the Israelite tale, at the end of the Flood “the ark came to rest . . . on the mountains of Ararat”— על הרי אררט . . . ותנח התבה (Gen. 8:4). In both narratives the motif of rest is opposed to and contrasted with turbulence and devastation. Moreover, both traditions highlight stability in that the sacral order of the world is to be preserved. Together with “wing[e]d birds of heaven” (*mu-up-pa-a[r-ša iš-šû-ur] ša-ma-î*) Atra(m)-ĥasîs takes with him: *el-lu-ti* [. . .] *ka-ab-ru-ti* [. . .], i.e., “clean,” “fat” [animals],<sup>8</sup> paralleled by Noah’s “clean animals” (Gen. 7:2).<sup>9</sup> Thus, at the outset the need for sacrifice is taken into account: in spite of the total devastation, the Flood does not put an end to the fundamental order of the cosmos (Atra-ĥasîs III v 30–35; Gen. 8:21).

The biblical version of the story contains an additional indication of the preservation of order: the steady rise of the waters suggests stability, and has the effect of toning down the turbulence of the Deluge, depicted so vividly in the Mesopotamian epic (Atra-ĥasîs III, ii 48–55; iii 5–18;<sup>10</sup> Gilgamesh XI 105–11).

in the Bible,” in B. Uffenheimer, ed., *Bible Studies Y. M. Grintz In Memoriam* (= *Te’udah* 2; Tel Aviv, 1982), 231–50 [in Hebrew with English summary]; Dennis P. Sylva, “The Changing of Images in Ps 23.5,6,” *ZAW* 102 (1990), 111–16.

5. W. G. Lambert, “DINGIR.SA.DIB.BA Incantations,” *JNES* 33 (1974), 267–321, at 290, l. 22 of the bilingual incantation (for the monolingual Akkadian, see 278). This incantation now has a monolingual Sumerian parallel in *IM* IX: V. For other instances of the idiom see *CAD*, s.v. *mû*.

6. Imagery used to celebrate divine salvation as against human despair includes the renewed Exodus (Isa. 41:17–19) and the image of God as a divine warrior (42:10–13); see also B. W. Anderson, “Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah,” in B. W. Anderson & W. Harrelson, eds., *Israel’s Prophetic Inheritance: Essays in Honour of J. Muilenburg* (London, 1962), 177–95, esp. 189–92.

7. See also L. R. Bailey, *Noah: The Person and the Story in History and Tradition* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1989), 168.

8. W. G. Lambert & A. R. Millard, *Atra-ĥasîs—The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969), 93.

9. This is not the place to discuss diachronic aspects of the Flood narrative; on the relations among the various enumerations of the animals see S. E. Loewenstamm, “The Flood,” *Comparative Studies in the Bible and Ancient Oriental Literatures* (AOAT 204; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1980), 93–121, esp. 104–5. Contrary to Loewenstamm’s suggestion, the motif of cleanness also belongs to the epic tradition.

10. Lambert-Millard, *Atrah.*, 92–94; see also the Assyrian recension, U, rev., ll. 5–18, *ibid.*, 122–24, and the Sumerian tale, v 201–5, *ibid.*, 142–44.

This notion of stability is buttressed by the positive overtones of the name *Noah*, which, by its very meaning, balances the devastating vehemence of the Deluge. At the end of the narrative, we are told that the dove did not find "a resting-place" for her feet (מנוח; 8:8). What is more, when Noah offered his sacrifice, God "smelled the sweet fragrance"—את ריח הניחוח (8:21), a symbol par excellence for Noah's rescue and the survival of mankind. In these episodes the words related to נח, by root (מנחה) or by paronomasia (ניחוח), are explicitly linked to the idea of stability and continuation of animate life.

These data shed new light on some features of the opening of the narrative. After the announcement of the divine decision to destroy mankind, the narrator asserts: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord"—ונוח מצא חן בעיני ה' (6:8), with the remarkable similarity between נח and חן.<sup>11</sup> This paronomasia highlights the positive side: notwithstanding the impending destruction, there still will be "rest" and "grace." By the same token, the decision of bringing the Deluge is represented by means of the root נחם את האדם: וינחם ה' כי עשה את האדם—"And the Lord repented that He had made man" (6:6, cf. v. 7b). The grave implications of the divine reconsideration of creation are mitigated by the similarity of נח to נחם. Like effects are attained by the use of the verbal root מחי in the divine decision אמחה את האדם—"I shall wipe out man" (v. 7). This threat is balanced from the outset by the similarity in sound between אמחה, וינחם, and נח.<sup>12</sup> The name Noah, then, stands at the center of a broad set of similar vocables which permeate the entire Flood tale. By virtue of the meaning "rest," and the connotation of stability, this set balances the idea of devastation by the Flood. Thus, the very name of the surviving hero turns into a symbol of the polarity of destruction and hope for the future, which is fundamental to the structure of the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

The connections between the name Noah and expressions of stability are made explicit by some rabbinic comments on the derivation of this name. For instance, the prominent Palestinian Amora, R. El'azar ben Pedath, sees a link between נח and ריח ניחוח (8:21): וירח "י" את ריח הניחוח: לשם קרבנו נקרא—"Because of his sacrifice he was called so" (Midrash *Bereshith Rabbah* 25:2).<sup>14</sup> His contemporary, R. Yose ben Hanina, refers to the end of the Flood (8:4): לשם נחת התיבה: "because of the resting of the Ark" (ibid.). These midrashic derivations of Noah's name clearly allude to its positive overtones and thus indicate an intuitive awareness of the bi-polar structure of the narrative. As this insight is nowhere stated explicitly, it cannot count as a formal commentary. Rather, it is implied by free, creative expressions of the

11. This feature has been noticed by U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, I: From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem, 1961), 288–89.

12. Noted by Cassuto, *Genesis, I*, 303, 307; Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 372. וינחם, with its *m,n*, mediates between נח (*n*) and אמחה (*m*). In מנוח (8:8) the similarity to וינחם is even stronger.

13. On the role of fundamental structural oppositions in Hebrew Biblical narrative, see F. H. Polak, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible—Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem, 1994), 138–41 [in Hebrew].

14. Midrash *Bereshith Rabbah* 25:2 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 240). The implications of this paronomasia were noted by J. Halévy, "Recherches Bibliques XXIV—Noe, le Deluge et les Noahides," *REJ* 22 (1891), 161–89, esp. 170–71, who considers this the correct derivation. See also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem, 1964), 119 (also commenting on the similarity to Gen. 5:29); G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, Texas, 1987), 189.

impression the narrative made on these rabbis, who played the role of reader and listener, were alert to certain of the features of the tale, and let their comments be guided by these impressions. Hence, their comments indicate an audience response to the fundamental polarity of the narrative.<sup>15</sup>

Such responses antedate rabbinic literature. The biblical tradition offers an etymological explanation of the name *Noah* by means of the root נחם, “to comfort.” Lamech announces: “This one will comfort us in our travail and in the strain of our hands”—זה ינחמנו ממעשנו ומעצבון ידינו (5:29). This derivation is problematic: it fails to allude to the Flood; נחם is no more than a remote lexical association of the name supposedly explained. This derivation, then, does not point to the “sense” of the name. In fact, such “sense” is, by logical necessity, a matter of connotation alone, since the denotation of the name is its bearer himself. The name *Noah* is used correctly if and only if it designates a person bearing this name. As any name derivation belongs to the domain of connotation, it may defy the strict rules of linguistic analysis. The explanation of Noah’s name by way of נחם does not suggest a notion of bilateral roots, but evokes positive associations, not unlike those suggested in the midrashic derivation.<sup>16</sup>

15. On audience response and reception criticism, see H. R. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *New Literary History* 2 (1970), 7–37. In Jauss’ view comments on the text are expressive of the response of a certain, *actual* reader on features of the text. This notion has been anticipated by Heinemann’s view of Midrash exegesis as “creative philology,” for which see Y. Heinemann, *Darkey Ha’aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1954) [Hebrew]. On Midrash exegesis, Second Temple versions of biblical narrative (“rewritten Bible”), and inner-biblical continuation of the ancient tale as indicative of the reader’s response to problems implied by the ancient tradition, see S. E. Loewenstamm, “The Death of Moses,” *From Babylon to Canaan: Studies in the Bible and Its Oriental Background* (Jerusalem, 1992), 136–66, esp. 136–37, 146–52; idem, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, trans. B. J. Schwartz (Jerusalem, 1992), 18–22, 71–171; D. Boyarin, “Old Wine in New Bottles: Intertextuality and Midrash,” *Poetics Today* 8 (1987), 539–56. For Boyarin’s view of the midrashic continuation as a creative response to the stimulus provided by the ancient tale, see his “Inner-Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality, and the Dialectic of Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990), 29–48, esp. 41–44; see also: J. Kugel, “The Bible’s Earliest Interpreters,” *Prooftexts* 7 (1987), 269–83. On Genette’s analysis of these issues and their application to the integration of the synchronic and the diachronic in biblical tradition, see F. H. Polak, “Biblical Narrative as a Palimpsest: On the Role of Diachrony in Structural Analysis,” *Amsterdamse cahiers voor exegese en Bijbelse theologie* 9 (1988), 22–34 (Dutch with English summary); idem, *Biblical Narrative*, chap. 6.

16. For the philological rejection of this and other derivations of the name Noah, as well as a discussion of the LXX reading (hardly reflecting נִיחָנוּ), see the invaluable commentary of A. Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, KHAT 11 (Leipzig, 1882), 110–11. On paronomasia in name derivations, see already E. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die Biblische Litteratur komparativisch dargestellt* (Leipzig, 1900), 291–94, esp. 293; this theme has been analysed by I. L. Seeligmann, “Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegese,” *VTSup* 1 (Leiden, 1953), 150–81, esp. 157–63, 168–70; see now also M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramath Gan, 1991), 32, 78–97, 203–4; L. L. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation: The Hebrew names in Philo* (Atlanta, 1988), 192–93. This is not to reject the observation that Lamech’s explanation anticipates the story of Noah the vintner rather than the Flood narrative, as urged by K. Budde, *Die Biblische Urgeschichte (Genesis 1–12,5)* (Giessen, 1883), 306–8. For instance, the narrator of the Flood narrative could have borrowed the name from an earlier version of the wine tale because of the central function of the idea of rest in the Flood tradition. Alternatively, a former version of the Flood narrative might have had a kind of wine tale for its opening. In any case, even though the juxtaposition of נח and נחם is common to this derivation

In fact, in ancient Palestinian midrash-exegesis the problems implied by Lamech's explanation of Noah's name were already noticed. Rabbi Johanan, the third century head of the rabbinic academy of Tiberias and master of the sages quoted above, comments that: לא השם הוא המדרש ולא המדרש הוא השם—"the name does not fit the explanation, nor the explanation the name." In his view, this discrepancy indicates that the cattle, having become rebellious after Adam's sin, now came to rest: כיון שבא נח נינוחו (Midrash *Bereshith Rabbah* 25:2).<sup>17</sup> His observations are complemented by those of his associate, Rabbi Shimeon ben Laqish, who envisages an inundation: עד שלא עמד נח, היו המים עולים ומציפים אותם בקבריהם . . . כיון שעמד נח—נינוחו—"Before Noah came to the scene (stood up), the water kept rising and inundating them in their graves . . . After Noah's appearing, they came to rest" (ibid.).<sup>18</sup>

Like the remarks of their pupils, R. Jose and R. El'azar, adduced above, these comments are indicative of the audience response to the connotation of Noah's name. On a thematic level, all these sayings point to the notion of stability; on the level of *motifs*, there is a connection with water in general and inundation in particular.

The appellation מי נח, used by the prophet of the exile, likewise embodies an audience response. This phrase could be regarded as a continuation of, and a creative reaction to, the basic structure of the Flood narrative. The tiny ark drifting forth on the immense waters of the flood symbolizes continued stability through the name of its builder and main inhabitant. *Saevis in undis tranquillus*, Noah bridges over the antedeluvian world and the renewed order after the Flood.

According to this view of the Flood narrative, the deluge does not signify the suspension of the cosmos<sup>19</sup> but is no more than a temporary intermission, a reminder of the possible alternative of order. This alternative, however, is not an actual option. In the Mesopotamian tradition, both the *Atra-ḥasīs* epic and the story of Utnapishtim

and the *motif* of divine repent (6:6), it does not entail a common origin, for paronomasia is a widespread phenomenon. In Ps. 23:4 one notes ינחמני, after מי מנחות of v. 2 (of course, the reading ינחמני has been conjectured; in Ps. 43:3, Pesh. apparently reflects ינחמני, but at 23:4 = MT).

17. Ed. Theodor-Albeck, 239–40. Although the formal basis for R. Johanan's comments is provided by the "rest" of the cattle in Exod. 23:12, his insight anticipates Budde's theory: both connect the explanation of the name with features of the *Urgeschichte*.

18. This remark is based on the "rest in the grave" (Isa 57:2). The myth of the rebellion of the sea (שור של ים, "the Prince of the Sea," TB *Baba Bathra* 74b) is still alluded to in rabbinic literature, as shown by U. M. Cassuto, "The Israelite Epic," *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (Jerusalem, 1975), 2:69–109, esp. 82–83.

19. The *motif* of the ending of the deluge by closing the windows of heaven implies the continued existence of the firmament, as shown by S. E. Loewenstamm, "The Waters of the Biblical Deluge—Their Onset and their Disappearance," *From Babylon to Canaan*, 297–314, esp. 306–11, as against H. Gunkel, *Genesis, HKAT* (Göttingen, 1902), 68, 127; J. A. Emerton, "Spring and Torrent" in Ps lxxiv 15," *VTSup* 15 (1966), 122–33, esp. 127–29. For the suggestion that the deluge suspends the separation of the "wet" and the "dry," see M. Casalis, "The Dry and the Wet—A Semiological Analysis of Creation and Flood Myths," *Semiotica* 17 (1976), 35–76; see also: J.-L. Ska, "Séparation des eaux et de la terre ferme dans le récit sacerdotal," *NRT* 113 (1981), 512–32. However, the continued existence of the windows of heaven entails the possibility of separation, with no need for a new creative-separative act (this has been noted by Ska, 524).

end by showing the gods in need of man and his sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> In Israelite narrative, Noah's offering does not fulfill this task explicitly. It does, however, indicate the continued existence of the sacred order of the world. Moreover, the stability implied by Noah's name is expressly affirmed by the closing promise: the Flood will not return (8:20-22; 9:11-16).

The polarity of the Flood's vehemence and the notion of "rest," then, is not only fundamental to the structure of the biblical narrative itself. It is a permanent feature of the tradition, from the pre-biblical, Akkadian epic to the inner- and post-biblical literature, and thus a basic factor in transmission and audience response.

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20. For the notion of man's "precarious" existence, see T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of the Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven-London, 1976), 120-21. Apparently, the plagues devised by Enki in order to control the increase of the human population introduce a new equilibrium, which could be seen as correlative to the antithesis of prosperity and destruction. This notion also is relevant for the Flood tale in the story of Gilgamesh' quest: man cannot attain immortality, as declared by Utnapishtim himself.