



On Primal Fear and Confidence: Reinterpreting the Myth of the Flood as the Climate Changes

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As the United States inches toward an effective response to global warming, I wonder whether we might not lose confidence in our own survival—that is, the conviction that God wants humanity to continue on earth. After all, we humans have undermined and destroyed the natural systems that support life in all its diminishing abundance. The extension of human society into virtually every ecosystem has also accelerated the extinction of species at a rate not seen since the last mass extinctions recorded in geologic history. The skyrocketing human population of the earth is overfishing the oceans and emptying the jungles of megafauna. Deserts are advancing while aquifers, unchargeable on a human historical scale, are being depleted. Positive feedback loops may turn the melting of Arctic ice and of the Siberian and Canadian permafrost into unstoppable engines of climate change. Such melting threatens the oceanic equilibria, which sustain moderate temperature regimes on land and productive ecosystems in the ocean. Even our own species is at risk; on land, pests are moving north, bringing unfamiliar diseases with them. Human intrusions into ecosystems on the margins of human settlement

Myths work to evoke appropriate fear and then to break through a crust of ignorance to reorient listeners to deeper truths. The biblical flood story did this in the face of the “wickedness” and “violence” of its own day, and it can do so again in the face of the wickedness and violence of our pollution of the earth.

have increased the likelihood of pandemics by exposing microbial parasites to large reservoirs of human flesh.¹

Climate change, of course, presents the most urgent crisis. Credible science gives humankind a window of some ten years, perhaps less, to forestall major deleterious changes by halting the growth in greenhouse gas emissions.² For the moment, confidence prevails, both in calls to zero out our carbon footprints with a renewables revolution (see, for example, Al Gore's proposal in late July³), and in countervailing calls to sustain our lifestyle no matter what the cost. Yet such confidence on both sides may collapse as current destructive trends intensify. Think of how the previously unthinkable has become normal. There may come a point when even the most diehard advocates of unrestrained growth recognize that we are headed towards a crash, or when even the most diehard advocates of renewables realize that new technologies cannot save us from ourselves, that enduring political divisions will prevent a powerful united response of the sort needed. A sense of fatalism may set in, a fatalism underwritten by the dolorous conviction that it is too late; that we cannot save ourselves.

MYTH AS A MEANS TO EVOKE, AND COPE WITH, PRIMAL FEAR

A staple of Lutheran theology affirms that genuine human confidence presupposes the shattering of false confidence—that the new arises only in the ashes of the old. While such a salutary transition traditionally involves a dialectic of law and gospel, the environmental crisis calls for a different set of tools. We humans present a threat to the sustainability of natural systems but are trapped in denial, willful ignorance, and quite possibly despair. We are not likely to respond to dogmatic religious claims or sheer empirical fact, but need instead to experience primal natural fear: the kind of fear that rattles our cages, claws at our innards. It is fear that moves us into that journey that enables us to reground our lives in a deeper form of confidence.

To evoke primal fear with regard to the state of the earth, we need primordial myth. Those scientists who have tangled with creationism know well the power of religious dogma masquerading as science to create a false confidence based upon dismissal of actual scientific fact. While religious myth can be co-opted to such a function, it also can have a more positive use than encouraging a surrender to irrationality. Myth is the time-honored way to articulate, and to cope with, primal fear. Myths provide explanations in symbolic narrative form. They work by evoking a

¹For a comprehensive account of these indicators, see Lester Russel Brown, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006) chapters 2–6. There is debate, of course, concerning how serious these stresses are. For a compact counterview, see Bjørn Lomborg, *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming* (New York: Knopf, 2007) chapter 3.

²For the most disturbing recent prediction of how much time remains, see James Hansen et al., "Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?" available at http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TargetCO2_20080407.pdf (accessed 29 July 2008).

³Al Gore, "A Generational Challenge to Repower America," 17 July 2008, online at http://blog.algore.com/2008/07/a_generational_challenge_to_re.html (accessed 5 August 2008).

fear, and then breaking through a crust of ignorance to reorient listeners to deeper truths. Symbolic narratives can serve to jar the listener into hearing the warnings that otherwise fail to break through adult misunderstanding, ideology, or self-serving denial. A mythic rendering of catastrophic climate change might enable us to articulate and feel the power of empirically validated fears of the damage that rising levels of greenhouse gases are all but certain to do to human societies.

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To work, a myth has to connect viscerally with an experience that hovers inexpugnably on the horizon of a shared memory. While any disaster might serve—tsunamis, tornadoes, drought, heat waves—the flood image packs an emotional wallop for me, living in the flood-prone Red River Valley of the North. I presume it packs the same wallop for those millions of North Americans who have suffered the dirty tide of rising waters invading their homes and communities. “Flood” also happens to be the premiere biblical symbol to convey the irresistible destructive force of nature when unleashed by God. The experiences of millions of North Americans, from Grand Forks, North Dakota, to New Orleans, provides a ready, gut-level connection to the dark and cloudy world of the Genesis narrative. Here I will try to capture the logic of primal fear by laying out an unsparing, unsentimental interpretation of the myth of the flood, one that many readers will find “too strong” or even “unchristian” in its lack of reference to redemption by Jesus.⁴ But the emergency of climate change demands nothing less.

The plot of the flood myth (Gen 6:5–9:29) is disarmingly simple, at least on the surface: God has become angered by escalating bloodshed and corruption on earth, and proceeds by means of rain and flood to kill all the earth’s inhabitants except Noah and his family, who are directed to seek refuge in a floating ark. The floodwaters recede and these few people are directed to repopulate the earth, assured by God’s promise never again to use nature to annihilate all living beings. As science, the story line is absurd, even if archaeologists recently have produced an

⁴The myth of the flood has, since earliest Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, been seen as a Christian story, in the sense that God’s rescue of Noah and the earth was seen to foreshadow the salvation offered through Jesus Christ; most recently, see Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007) 72–73. Here, in contrast, I develop what I term a “strict” interpretation—one that seeks to work within the bounds set by the basic elements of the story—and imagine connections with the present, but without imputing a teleology not grounded in the pre-Christian text itself. Beyond the obvious epistemological questions, there is a difficult moral problem with a typological interpretation focused upon Jesus as the ultimate reference point of the story. Once Jesus is introduced, an eschatological escape hatch of atonement-driven salvation from the earth is opened, and interpreters must fight a singularly ambitious exegetical struggle to retain Jesus as an advocate for the earth (see, for example, Northcott’s heroic effort, *A Moral Climate*, 238–240, 267). Not everything God does needs to be absorbed into the Jesus-centered drama of redemption. The myth of the flood is all the more powerful because it offers hard truths that are accessible without importing a theological framework centered on salvation.

intriguing theory of an actual flood that might have inspired it.⁵ The plot is rendered no less absurd by pseudoscientific efforts to implicate Noah's flood in climate change. But when this story line seeps into our consciousness as myth, it tells us much about what such a disaster means to those who experience it. Confidence is what survivors of any natural disaster need, as they emerge from shelters to see how their ordered worlds have been churned by wave and water. Months, if not years, are needed to restore those orderly worlds, and the survivors need to know where God is in relation to this disaster. Their anxiety is primal: What did we do wrong? Was this flood a punishment sent by God? Where is God when climate-change floods inundate vast areas, climate-change oceans eat away coastlines, or climate-change drought turns earth to dust and lofts it into the sky? Here, the myth of the flood has offered a simple and powerful word of comfort: God wants the victims to survive. God pledges to Noah, in the first gesture explicitly identified as a "covenant" in the Bible, that no matter how great the evil committed by human beings, God will never again use natural disasters to annihilate all living beings. This comfort is powerful because it appears exceptionless: nothing we humans do can prompt God to take active steps to eliminate humanity from earth.

THE EMERGENCE OF PRIMAL FEAR: WILL GOD LET US DESTROY OURSELVES?

Survivors need more than a word of comfort to experience genuine confidence; they need answers to the questions prompted by their anxiety. They need to hear the truth about the causes of the disaster they experienced. Here we need to back up to the beginning of the story, where the myth of the flood enters an indictment against humanity. This indictment uncannily foreshadows the basic dynamic of climate change as a spiral of disruption and violence against the earth's natural processes. According to the Genesis writer, what triggered the flood was God's disgust with the human "wickedness" and "violence," evils that had the consequence of "corrupting" the earth (Gen 6:5, 11–13)—in short, a system-wide degradation that engulfed all living beings. While the actual indictment offers no further explanation of the content of this "violence" and "corruption," the laws that God lays down for the postflood world suggest that the first generations of humans were guilty of spilling blood upon the earth (Gen 9:3–6) in a pattern of escalating murder that presumably began with Cain's murder of Abel in Gen 4. This pattern of killing spiraled beyond humans, as some animals became carnivores as well, in violation of God's original design.⁶ "All flesh" (Gen 6:12) was caught up in the carnage, falling victim to the behavior of humans: animals, birds, and even the plants, which presumably absorbed blood into their roots from the polluted soil. Indeed, for God, only the ground itself escaped complicity; it was rendered a victim by the spilt blood that seeped into its porous surface. It needed to be cleansed; God prom-

⁵See "'Noah's flood' kick-started European Farming?" online at <http://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/newsnoah.shtml> (accessed 29 July 2008).

⁶Nahum M. Sarna, ed., *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 51.

ised to “blot out” all traces of these polluting and polluted beings, to restore the earth through the cleansing action of water (Gen 7:4).

Substitute greenhouse gases for blood, and the indictment stands anew. We humans have sprung life-giving substances—carbon dioxide, methane, and all the other greenhouse gases—from their natural cycles and limits, and they have become agents of system-destabilizing pollution. The Genesis account of how “all flesh” was caught up dovetails with the dawning scientific awareness of the action-reaction loops that involve nature in a tangled weave of interactive effects over decades and even centuries. The suspicion that rising levels of human-produced greenhouse gases are warming the earth has intensified scientific investigation of such causal linkages. Droughts, floods, melting, and freezing all paradoxically appear to be interlinked in a web of cause and effect, with human inputs or triggers at one end and a range of consequences at the other. “Corruption” may be the best term to encompass the complexity and global reach of these environmental challenges.

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When and if this mythic rendering of God’s indictment breaks through our ignorance, denials, and rationalizations, the runaway trends of major climate change must evoke another round of primal fear: Are we doomed? God has pledged not to destroy us, but can we be sure that God will not permit—or condemn—us humans to destroy ourselves, through the unintended consequences of our own actions? During the past five decades, it has become abundantly clear that the power to destroy the earth has been usurped by humanity, using nature as a proxy. Perhaps God has quietly withdrawn favor from us. Perhaps our plundering of nature, our pollution of the earth, and finally our rough interference with the climate have effectively cancelled the mandate of benevolent dominion that was conferred by God in Gen 1:28, and we are no longer welcome. Imagining such divine disillusionment is not difficult; only now is it beginning to dawn on us that earth’s other living creatures might be better off if humanity vacated the globe.⁷ This possibility refocuses our primal fear: What if God simply chooses to refrain from rescuing the human world from disasters of our own making? What if our climatic disruption of the earth is so offensive that God decides simply to permit current trends to continue, ending in a Malthusian crash—and without eschatological rescue?

⁷A. Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

FIVE FORMS OF FALSE CONFIDENCE, AS CHALLENGED BY THE MYTH OF THE FLOOD

1. Some Christians might read the myth of the flood to judge that such a crash is deserved. These “pessimists” acknowledge the flood as punishment, but see God’s anger directed at particular moral failures, such as abortion or homosexuality. These Christians are comforted by the thought that humanity might have avoided disaster had it maintained good moral tone. In their reading of the flood myth, they will identify with the righteousness of Noah and might even applaud God’s angry destruction of human murderers. But their frame of personal moral vice is far too narrow to catch the Gen 6 indictment of humanity for systemic corruption of nature.⁸ The flood was not due to individual moral crimes here and there, but to a pattern of escalating evil, a self-reinforcing totality that encompasses everyone. There is no privilege imparted by claiming to stand with Noah in righteousness and God’s favor; climate change will affect all of us, and particularly our children, without regard to our individual moral behaviors.

2. Other contemporary Christians are not bothered by the flood because they expect to be yanked from earth, to find a new and eternal home in heaven. These “salvationists” are confident in their rescue because all that matters is to be counted among the true believers. They identify with Noah, and see the church as their ark. This interpretation of the flood has a long pedigree. For the first fifteen hundred years of organized Christianity, the consolatory power of the flood story was due to its early absorption into the drama of redemption; God’s covenant with Noah was understood as prefiguring the salvation offered through Christ.⁹ Salvationists follow Augustine in seeing the material earth as instrumental to human welfare, without much regard for *its* welfare. To borrow metaphors developed by Paul Santmire, these salvationists are pilgrims looking forward and upward to the infinite, without a backward glance at the finite earth they leave behind.¹⁰ Yet what they ignore, to their peril, is the hard fact that it was human abuse of the earth that prompted God to send the flood in the first place, and that God’s intention in sending the flood

⁸See “‘Noah’s flood’ kick-started European Farming?” (note 5). The scientific argument that the melting of the Laurentide ice sheets caused the inundation of what is now the Black Sea suggests how ludicrous it is to assume that personal moral vices triggered the biblical flood or that repentance might have kept the flood from occurring. Only when these vices coalesce into a “corruption” of system-wide proportions, as with climate change, does it become meaningful to speak of the link between human behavior and natural disaster.

⁹Ironically enough, it seems to be only recently that Christians have read the flood story as having to do with the vulnerability of humankind to harm by natural forces. Perhaps the most well-known literary representations of Christian allegorical use of the flood story are the cycles of late medieval English mystery plays that typically included a drama about God’s covenant with Noah as prefiguring salvation in Christ. Martin Luther, interestingly enough, does not pursue this line of thinking in a significant way in his commentary on Genesis. Indeed, he expressly rejects the use of “allegory” as practiced by his teachers Jerome, Origen, and Augustine (Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6–14,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 2 [St. Louis: Concordia, 1960] 150–152). His interpretation of the myth of the flood focuses on the dialectic of broadly deserved condemnation and God’s generous grace, and he allows the use of allegorical connection between flood and baptism only as a device to reinforce what the word already teaches (153–157).

¹⁰H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 14–29, especially 25.

was to rescue the earth from pollution, even at an enormous cost in human life. And that revives our primal fear: What if God cares more for the ensemble of non-human creation than for human flourishing?

3. Primal fear is not assuaged by sterile denunciations of moral vice or cheap reassurances about ultimate rescue. Primal fear opens up a hunger for a strong antidote, in this case, what might be termed primal confidence. We need to be convinced that God really does want humanity to survive and flourish on this earth, despite our folly. Here the contemporary scene offers a range of ideologies. Most conspicuous, perhaps, are the “optimists” who view the earth as a material resource to be harvested aggressively for human flourishing. They take God’s pledge to Noah as a guarantee that natural disasters do not express any divine intent or judgment, and so believe that humans are licensed to do as they will with nature. They believe that their particular vocation is to reassert human control through technical skill, and so are likely to identify with Noah and his descendents who reclaimed the muddy wastes left by the flood and proceeded to develop agriculture. And they will cling to God’s promise that agriculture would never cease (Gen 8:22). But since they see no divine hand operating in natural catastrophes, they are unprepared for the escalating feedback loops (for example, the melting of Arctic ice and Siberian permafrost) initiated by the very technologies (coal-fired electricity) intended to save humans from the harsher side of nature. They therefore will have difficulty accepting the fact that their very optimism is implicated in the systemic “corruption” that prompted the flood.

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4. The myth of the flood corrects and shatters, where need be, competing assurances that obstruct our full appreciation of the crisis brought by human-caused climate change. No ideologies are exempt, even those most familiar and dear. Many scientists, let alone large numbers of environmentalists such as myself, might describe ourselves as “stewards,” those careful observers who want to maintain a balance between human and natural flourishing. The more skilled might even see themselves as “gardeners,” spiritual green thumbs, who know how to make synergistic use of nature in its cycles of growth, maturity, and decay. They see their vocation as a mandate to steer nature wisely in directions of pleasure and usefulness to its human caretakers. They will applaud Noah for taking in two or more individuals of every species, so that the ecological interdependencies of the natural world might be restored after the flood.

These stewards and gardeners will read the myth of the flood as a caution against human pride and violence, but not as a denial that humans can live in genuine harmony with their physical environment. As a result, they may be unpre-

pared for the raw depth of God's indictment. For the God of the flood myth intervenes on behalf of the earth and against (most of) humanity. God destroys almost all humans for having polluted and corrupted creation. After the flood subsides, God expresses no word of mourning or regret for the human victims whose corpses presumably litter the muddy landscape. The flood waters have subsided, but the denouement offers no reason to suppose that God has given up a fierce interest in the welfare of nonhuman creation.

What if God's other creatures would be frankly better off if we humans were dethroned from the apex of creation?

5. The fierceness of God's indictment plays differently into the thinking of one last group, which I will term "ecologists" in a broad sense. These will see God's passion for nonhuman creation as a welcome corrective to the human-centered bias of the salvationists, pessimists, optimists, or the stewards and gardeners. "Ecologists" see natural systems as having value independent of human needs, interests, and priorities, and so are keenly aware of how human pretensions of interdependence have worked against the survival and flourishing of nonhuman creatures. Against the stewards and the gardeners, they demote humanity to simply one species among others, a species that they see as having regrettably escaped natural limits to inflict devastation on other living systems. This decentered vantage point equips ecologists to avoid self-serving illusion. After the flood has subsided, God commands Noah's family to leave the ark so that "all flesh...[might] abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth" (Gen 8:17). The stewards and gardeners might believe that God wants us to take care of creation, but ecologists will point out that all Noah's family needed to do was put down the gangplank and let the creatures find their old niches.

The ecologist critique makes us wonder: What if God's other creatures would be frankly better off if we humans were dethroned from the apex of creation? After all, God sent the flood to cleanse and restore the earth. If anything, the God of the flood appears to side with the earth against the living beings who have trapped it in a spiral of corruption. Yet, to even the most biocentric ecologist, the view from the ark must be frightening. What Noah saw when opening the hatch was a trackless muddy waste, perhaps dotted with skeletal dead trees and rotting carcasses. Similarly, we can imagine the position of a much-battered humanity one or two centuries from now, looking out over the inundation of low coastlands that used to harbor hundreds of millions of people, the chaotic migration to already crowded higher ground, the disruption of the thermohaline conveyor that used to keep northern Europe from freezing, the disappearance of rainforests that used to keep us breathing, the extinction of mega- and microfauna that used to support whole food chains, and the overall carbon balance that used to prevent an inexorable slide to a new era of glaciation. Even the most ardent ecologist will wonder

whether humankind deserves such an extreme penalty for a few centuries of rapacious foolishness.

RESTORING HUMAN CONFIDENCE

God's indictment of human "corruption" resonates closely enough with the systemic consequences of climate change to evoke primal fear, along with revulsion and ultimately sorrow over humanity as the major agent of destruction. Yet the myth of the flood turns finally towards hope and assurance, and from within a deep sense of human culpability and fear it explains how and why we can be confident that God wants us to survive.

Hope begins to blossom when the ark settles into the postflood mud (Gen 8:15–21). God commands Noah, family, and the remaining creatures to repopulate the earth. Noah reciprocates by signaling, via sacrifice, his confidence that God will continue to preserve the remnant of creation just emerging from the ark. God, in turn, responds by renouncing the power to use nature as an unpredictable, uncontrollable weapon to extinguish humanity. In effect, God guarantees the conditions that make such restored confidence possible. The rest of the myth provides an indication of what these conditions are. In essence, God is prompted by Noah's gesture of worship to accommodate both human need and failure in a chastened expectation of how creation might survive, and it is this chastened expectation that provides us the firmest ground for confidence that God wants humanity to survive.

First, in a remarkable concession to the human propensity for wickedness, God chooses to exercise forbearance, but this forbearance operates against a backdrop of threat. From God's perspective, human wickedness and violence cannot be ended by extreme cleansing. The plotline makes it clear that annihilation will not work; the potential for wickedness surfaces immediately following the flood, when one of Noah's sons violates his father (Gen 9:20–27). God recognizes and concedes that human wickedness will continue, "for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Gen 8:21b). The potential for corrupting the earth will always be latent among survivors of the flood, and so the earth will always need protection. The conundrum faced by God is how to cope with a humanity that cannot be deterred from wickedness even by a massive die-off, yet is too fragile to live with the possibility that any future rain and flood might be freighted with God's will that they all perish again. The answer, of course, is a recurrent reminder: the twinned symbolism of rainfall and rainbow. Rainfall recalls the threat of collective annihilation; the rainbow that immediately follows is a reminder that God has taken God's own violence off the list of pressing human anxieties. The glorious gossamer arch spanning the heavens serves evermore as a reminder that no arrow of annihilation will ever again be fitted to God's celestial war bow.¹¹ Yet it does not appear against a peaceful blue sky. The rainbow, delicate and fleeting against the dark receding

¹¹Walter Brueggemann and Ronn Kerr, *Genesis* (Nashville, TN: Kerr, 1989) 84.

storm clouds, conveys the tangled relation between God's abiding love for creation and God's anger against those who violate the earth.

Second, against this dark backdrop, God expresses a profound respect for human life by entrusting humans with the capacity to develop their own power and control over nature—within stipulated bounds. God promises not to renew the punishment imposed upon the first man and woman—the cursing of the ground—and pledges not to undercut the agricultural cycle necessary to sustain human life (Gen 8:21–22; cf. 3:22). In another striking concession, God delegates to human beings the authority to engage in one particular form of killing—animals hunted by humans for food. This permission amounts to a significant retreat from God's initial intent for creation: that humans and animals originally were to eat plants (Gen 1:29). The newly expanded permission is limited, to be sure; it is hedged within a sharp categorical prohibition against any unauthorized killing of humans by other humans or by animals (Gen 9:3–6). But such a hedge only emphasizes the significance of the gift of this qualified permission to kill. It enhances the prospects for human survival in three ways: humans may kill animals for food; animals may not kill humans; and potential human murderers themselves are deterred from killing by being accountable to God for their very lives.

God's act of delegating the use of lethal force to humanity has become deeply problematic, given that we are in the process of abusing that concession by destroying the conditions for our own existence

God's act of delegating the use of lethal force to humanity has become deeply problematic, given that we are in the process of abusing that concession by destroying the conditions for our own existence. Indeed, the stewards and gardeners among us may think we no longer have the right to kill animals for food, if we ever did. The optimists who thought that nature was getting along just fine in its random unpredictability might suddenly lose confidence in the human capacity to use lethal force wisely. They might join the pessimists in suspecting that God, under the moral cover of a pledge not to destroy humanity through active effort, is choosing to sit passively by while humanity destroys itself in part through massive factory livestock production, with enormous methane generation contributing to the subtly rising temperatures that in turn are generating unprecedented storms, massive droughts, and other disasters.¹² Primal fear emerges yet again, and needs to be answered by the sober realism of God's pledge. God's covenantal pledge assumes no upper limit on how much destruction such human wickedness and folly might cause, and certainly does not release the pressure of the moment by offering a

¹²For a capsule description of the threat, see Northcott, *A Moral Climate*, 237. Northcott argues that early Christians renounced the permission given to Noah and descendants, and clearly sees meat-eating as an unsustainable planetary practice (238–242).

safety net that will kick in automatically once a certain level of catastrophe is reached. God does not legislate vegetarianism, nor any other particular prescription for mitigating climate change. In delegating significant authority over animal life and death to humanity, God leaves to humanity the entire burden of identifying and taking the necessary steps to preserve the earth.

God has chosen to cope with the destructive bent of irascible human creatures by opening up a moral space of generous forbearance, but we are not on our own in coping with that daunting loneliness. As suggested by God's promises and directives in Gen 8–9, this moral space is not a vacuum waiting to be filled by any human preference and action, but the surface of the earth, already infused with God's own pledge as a model for human behavior. God cannot expect humans to restrict the use of violence to lawful execution unless God does. God cannot expect humans to preserve the lives of each other if God is not reliably committed to their preservation as well. And perhaps most important, God cannot expect humans to become fiercely devoted to the preservation of natural systems unless God is. All these divine commitments play into the formation of primal confidence. The firmest base for human confidence lies in discerning and following the model God sets. Trusting and loyal creatures are more likely to internalize restraints on their behavior than, say, alienated creatures who are anxious only to stave off punishment. By seeking to elicit trust and loyalty, God attempts to diminish the propensity to wickedness in human creatures. A doubting soul wonders whether and why God has really renounced the final violence of extinction; in contrast, a soul rendered confident by the myth of the flood sees God giving up the power of destruction so that human creatures might do the same.

The myth of the flood “works” if and when it instills listeners with the primal confidence to do exactly what God wants them to do, which is to survive and flourish within the constraints imposed by the earth's natural systems. The implications of the myth for a world facing disastrous climate change can be summed up in three affirmations.

God will never use nature to destroy humanity; God will exercise forbearance, for God wills that humanity survive.

We humans might destroy ourselves through nature, as we continue to corrupt the earth with the cascading effects of sinfulness.

Despite this risk, God remains committed to delegating control of the earth to human creatures, in the expectation that we will learn before it is too late to imitate God in exercising our own forbearance.

IT'S UP TO US

The myth of the flood offers us a way to articulate the meaning of climate change in the face of widespread denial and ignorance. It first heightens the sense of primal fear by cutting away our cherished illusions. It leaves us with no way to

offload the blame, as pessimists hope; no ironclad guarantee of happy outcome, as the salvationists hope; no comforting illusion of nature's invulnerability, as optimists hope; no affirmation of our benevolent dominion, as stewards and gardeners hope; and no release from the God-given task of surviving and prevailing, as ecologists might hope. In its own sober realism, the myth of the flood suggests that the answer to primal fear lies not in pursuing illusions of security, despair, ideology, or simply giving up, but in facing the scientific facts directly. The myth supports the science of climate change by asserting that there indeed is a close link between human action and nature's reaction, and builds upon that affinity by asserting that what we do in and to nature matters very much to God.

The myth of the flood should not leave us unchanged; God wants us both to be warned, even terrorized, by primeval threat, and assured by primal promise. Rainfall will be followed by rainbow. But now that we have control over natural cycles—an eventuality not foreseen in the myth as it appears in the Bible—it is up to us humans to perpetuate conditions for human survival. God's covenant with Noah opens up a moral space in which we may indeed destroy ourselves or save ourselves, whether by choice, inadvertence, or sheer dumb luck. God promises no interference of a destructive sort; the responsibility therefore devolves upon human societies to develop the means to keep ourselves from self-destructing through corruption of the earth and the murder of each other. This task of survival involves keeping our violence under control, both towards nature and towards ourselves. For this work, the myth of the flood offers an austere sense of confidence: we are on our own. If God's strategy of forbearance and delegating power yields only meager fruit in terms of improved human foresight and care, that is not God's responsibility. But if we internalize God's fiercely protective concern for the whole of creation, we may just have a fighting chance. ⊕

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