



DENNIS
PRAGER

GENESIS
*God, Creation, and
Destruction*

THE RATIONAL
BIBLE

THE ALPERSON EDITION

SAMPLE

THE RATIONAL BIBLE: GENESIS

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God, Creation, and Destruction

DENNIS PRAGER

EDITED BY JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

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REGNERY
FAITH

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To Sue

*“It is not good for a man to be alone.
I will make him a helper who is his equal.”
—Genesis 2:18 (literal translation)*

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 6

WE NEED BOTH THE GOOD URGE AND THE BAD URGE

6.5 The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.

The Hebrew word *yetzer* (translated here as “plan”) is the noun of the biblical verb “to form” or “make.” It is therefore often translated as the creative “urge” or “impulse.” One may understand it as what Freud called the “Id”—the human being’s primal drives and impulses that need to be reined in by the conscience. *Yetzer* has been central to Jewish thought from the earliest times to the present. The human being, Judaism teaches, has a good yetzer (*yetzer hatov*; often translated as “the good inclination”) and a bad yetzer (*yetzer harah*, “the evil inclination”), and they are in permanent conflict. However, Judaism has also long held that we need both *yetzers*. This is an enormously important insight:

“Were it not for the evil inclination,” the Midrash teaches, “men would not build homes, take wives, have children, or engage in business.”¹ In other words, we do a variety of good things for very mixed, sometimes purely selfish, motives.

At the same time—and this point is less commonly noted—the *yetzer hatov* also must be reined in. Much of the evil of the twentieth century was caused by ideologies that appealed to the *yetzer hatov*. Communism—in its insistence on “equality” and that the state should own all the means of production and use that ownership to eliminate poverty—is the best example. It resulted in about 100 million dead innocents (non-combatants) and more than a billion people deprived of elementary human rights. (The other great twentieth-century evil, Nazism, was rooted in racism, and therefore primarily appealed to the *yetzer harah*.)

PEOPLE ARE GUILTY FOR THEIR BAD ACTIONS, NOT THEIR BAD THOUGHTS

The Torah acknowledges this baser component of the human psyche and therefore does not demand that people feel guilty over their bad thoughts. It is only bad actions—the “wickedness” mentioned in the first half of this verse—that are punished. (The one seeming exception, the tenth of the Ten Commandments, not to covet what belongs to our neighbor, is explained in the commentary to Exodus 20:14).

Concerning the goodness or badness of human nature, see the essay in Genesis 8:21: “Why the Belief that People are Basically Good is Both Wrong and Dangerous”).

DOES GOD KNOW THE FUTURE?

6.6 And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth

God regretting something He had done seems to be incompatible with omniscience. If God knows everything, how could He “regret” anything—let alone anything He Himself had done? Doesn’t omniscience mean God knows what

will happen? The traditional Jewish solution to this apparent contradiction was to assert “everything is foreseen, yet permission [free will] is given” (*ha-kol tzafuey v’hareshut nituna*).² This means God gives us freedom of choice, but He knows what we will choose.

This explanation assumes, of course, God knows the future. And how could God know the future? Because He exists outside of time. Since Einstein, we have known time is relative. Therefore, the notion of existence outside of time is both scientifically and theologically tenable.

However, there is another way to explain God regretting something He had done: When it comes to what human beings will do, God may in fact not know the future. While God knows the future behavior of everything else in nature—animals, trees, stars—it is possible God does not know what human beings will do. Unlike everything else in the universe, humans were endowed with the ability to go against God’s will. So, yes, God knows everything that humans do—but not necessarily everything humans *will* do.

GOD: “THE MOST TRAGIC FIGURE IN THE BIBLE”

6.6 (cont.) and His heart was saddened.

Based on this verse, Rabbi David Hartman described God as the most tragic figure in the Bible. His reasoning? God is repeatedly disappointed by His favorite creature—the human being. The beginning of Genesis is a series of successive frustrations on the part of God, who sets about creating a world that will be good for human beings, only to find that they thwart his plans for the world to such an extent that He ultimately destroys it.

Consistent with this tragic sensibility, Nahum Sarna notes that God destroys the world out of sadness rather than anger. Although there are other points in the Torah where God is angry, this time He is simply sad.

One more point concerns God having an emotion—in this case, sadness. Does God have emotions? Given how we humans regard emotions—as something purely human (but experienced to a lesser extent by higher animals)—we tend not

to identify God with emotions. Indeed, given that we are made in His image, why would we humans possess an ability God does not possess?

ESSAY: WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD DESTROY THE WORLD?

6.7 The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created

Critics of the Bible frequently point to this story as an example of a mean-spirited God. In my view, this story shows the opposite: a God preoccupied with goodness.

After God created man—and only then—did God announce that what He created was “very good.” After the other days’ creations, He saw what He created and announced they were “good,” but never “very good” (see Genesis 1:26-31). The reason God now says “very good” is God had such high aspirations for humanity.

But, to God’s immense sadness (“His heart was saddened”), God saw how much human beings engaged in cruelty to other human beings. And given how widespread this cruelty was, God decided to start over again. God wanted a good world, meaning a world in which people treated others decently, or at the very

If God were to allow humanity to continue, that would mean only more and more gratuitous suffering on earth.

least, were not cruel to others. Therefore, if evil dominates and there is virtually no good in the world, there is no longer any purpose to human existence. Indeed, if God were to allow humanity to continue, that would mean only more and more gratuitous suffering on earth. God was not prepared to allow that.

I admire such a God. I admire a God who, more than anything else, wants us humans to be good to one another—just like most parents want more than anything else for their children to be good to each other.

Man’s evil to other people was the reason God decided to destroy the world. Unlike other flood stories the world over, in the Torah, the reason for the flood is human cruelty—one obvious proof being the one person God saved was saved because he was “righteous.”

In fact, in light of that, one can ask an even more troubling question than why God destroyed the world—why didn’t He destroy humanity entirely? Why did He save even one family—for it was from this one family that all the world’s later evil people descended. Given how much cruelty humans have inflicted upon other humans since the Flood (the staggering amount of torture, murder, rape, slavery and sheer sadism that so many people have suffered), one might ask why God saved Noah and his family. Think about those hundreds of millions of horrifically suffering people and consider how *they* might have answered the question: “Do you wish that God had destroyed the entire world?” In other words, was saving humanity worth all the terrible suffering to come?

Whatever their response might be, what is abundantly clear from the Flood story that is about to follow is God so loathes human cruelty He decided to destroy the world and preserve only the most righteous person (and his immediate family)—in the hope a better humanity would issue from him.

ESSAY: WHY WERE ANIMALS DESTROYED IN THE FLOOD?

6.7 (cont.) —men together with beasts, creeping things and birds of the sky, for I regret that I made them.”

Many readers naturally ask, “What did the animals do wrong that they deserved to die?” Since animals do not have free will, they obviously could not be guilty of any wrongdoing. Clearly, then, the animals weren’t killed as punishment.

Since we humans cannot know the mind of God, we cannot know the definitive reason animals were destroyed. But we can surmise some explanations.

The most obvious answer to the animal question is that the only way God could have saved all the animals was to have them removed from the earth during the flood. While God can presumably do anything, such an act would have stretched the reader’s credulity. Having all the animals hover in midair for forty days—and somehow either eat food or not need to eat any food while doing so—would have made the story, whose lesson is entirely one of morality, sound distinctly absurd.

Of course, one may respond that God could have killed all the human beings in some other way—one which had no effect on animals. That brings us to a second explanation.

Another possible reason for the death of the animals is this: Without man, there is no intrinsic purpose to the world. The biblical view is everything—the entire world, and, indeed, the entire universe—was created for man. Stated plainly, if there are no human beings to appreciate animals and rivers and mountains, there is no point to them. This is, of course, an anthropocentric view of the world. The only other possible view of the world would be nature-centric. But nature has no self-awareness—no ability to know good and evil, to love, to relate to God, to compose a symphony, to think about life. The notion that the world absent the human being has significance is meaningless. Only human beings give nature significance.

Why else would God create nature—including animals—if not for man to appreciate and (humanely) use? Moreover, unlike human beings, animals do not consciously seek immortality. Only humans do. The death of animals—unlike the infliction of gratuitous suffering on animals, which the Torah repeatedly prohibits (see, for example, Deuteronomy 22:10 and 25:4)—is not an inherently moral problem.

But, one might ask, if the world was created for man, why did animals preexist man for so many years? The Torah's view would be they were created to prepare the world for the coming of man. Certainly, secular people would argue that animals made the natural world as we know it possible. And they made modern civilization possible. From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, all our energy came from fossil fuel. Without fossils and the fuel they provided, we would still be living as people did in the Middle Ages, burning candles for light and riding on horses rather than in cars. Whatever energy sources (e.g., wind, sun) mankind ultimately uses, it was fuel from animal remains—fossils—that made all technological progress possible. And that has enormous moral implications. The modern lifesaver, the hospital, for example, cannot function without electricity.

To those moderns who place the same value on animal life as on human life, no explanation for the death of the animals in the Flood is acceptable. But the Bible does not value human and animal life equally. The Bible is anthropocentric.

6.8 But Noah found favor with the Lord.

6.9 This is the line of Noah.

ESSAY: PEOPLE ARE TO BE JUDGED BY THE STANDARDS OF THEIR TIME, NOT OF OURS

6.9 (cont.) Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.

Noah is called a *tzaddik* (translated as “righteous man”), the highest moral appellation in later Judaism. Literally, the word would be translated as “just,” and it also means “innocent.”

The phrase “in his age” (literally, “in his generations”) raises one of the most interesting questions in religious and moral thought: Why was that phrase included? The verse could simply have stated, “Noah was a righteous man.” Why did it add “in his age”?

According to one rabbinic opinion, this phrase is intended to suggest that Noah was good only in comparison to his depraved contemporaries; had he lived in an essentially decent society, he would have been regarded as nothing special. But others hold the opposite opinion—that “in his age” reflects well upon Noah, given that he managed to be a good person even though he was raised and lived among evil people.

Jewish tradition has tended to favor the first interpretation, that Noah was not particularly outstanding. As an example, unlike Abraham, who argued strenuously with God not to destroy Sodom (Genesis 18:16-33), when God told Noah of His intention to destroy the world, Noah did not argue with God but concerned himself solely with building an ark to save himself and his family.

The minority view, as expressed by Rabbi Resh Lakish, was that Noah's remaining a good man while living among evil people demonstrated how good a man he was. Resh Lakish's background, as recorded in the Talmud, may have

By stating Noah was righteous "in his age," the Torah makes it clear we are to judge people by the standards of their age, not the standards of our age.

influenced his opinion. In one report, he was raised in a circus; in another, he was raised among a band of thieves.³ In contrast to the large majority of rabbinic sages, who grew up among very decent people, Resh Lakish was therefore aware from personal experience how difficult it is to overcome a bad environment.⁴

These contrasting opinions raise a fundamental question about judging human beings: Is it easier, and therefore less of an accomplishment, to be good when you are surrounded by essentially good people; or is it easier to be relatively good in comparison to an evil society?

In my view, both opinions are valid. But I side with the minority. It is extremely difficult to be decent when living among indecent people. Few people have the moral courage to reject their environment.

That is one reason I believe the words "in his age" were appended—to emphasize Noah's virtue, not to minimize it.

But there is another, perhaps even more important, reason. By stating Noah was righteous "in his age," the Torah makes it clear we are to judge people by the standards of their age, not the standards of our age. There is a great temptation to judge people who lived before us by the moral standards of our time. This is wrong. By doing this, we end up concluding virtually no one who lived before us was a good person, an obviously absurd proposition. For this reason, the Torah states Noah was righteous in his age. That is the only age that counts in assessing the morality of people.

That God entrusted the future of humanity in Noah reinforces this view. God Himself judged Noah within "his age."⁵

This issue is quite relevant to our time. In America, for example, students are taught from the youngest age that many of America's founders owned slaves,

and that America itself allowed slavery (in the South). Therefore, they are told, these were bad men and America was a bad place.

This provides a superb example of the overriding thesis of this commentary—ignorance of the Bible in the Western world has led to an abandonment of wisdom in the Western world. People familiar with the Noah story have the wisdom to know that a person must be judged as God judged Noah: “in his age.” At the time of America’s founding, virtually every society in the world—including non-Western Asian, African, and Muslim societies—practiced slavery, often in far greater numbers than America did. Moreover, it was America and the Western, Bible-based (“Judeo-Christian”) civilization that abolished slavery before any other civilization did. And ultimately, the American founders’ values created a nation that provided more non-whites with more liberty and more prosperity than any other society. That is how George Washington and Thomas Jefferson should be judged: the way God judged Noah—“in his age”—and by the freedom-loving and freedom-spreading society they ultimately created.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE TORAH’S FLOOD STORY

The biblical Flood story was unprecedented in that it was based on the concept of ethical monotheism.

Ethical monotheism is the overriding idea, the supreme ideal, and the primary innovation of the Torah idea: that God is moral, that God demands moral behavior from all human beings, and that God will judge them according to His universal moral law.

Other ancient Near Eastern cultures had their own flood stories in which the gods destroyed the world—for reasons having little or nothing to do with human evil. They often saved a single person—but it was because the person was handsome or wealthy or was a half-god, not because he was more moral than other people.

For example, in the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the gods destroyed mankind except for a man named Utnapishtim. Why? Because human beings

were making too much noise, making it impossible for the gods to sleep. Likewise, in other Near Eastern flood stories, the gods simply made a capricious decision to destroy mankind.

This is a good place to explain the importance of the Torah even if one doesn't believe all the stories in it. Whether there was an enormous flood that destroyed much or nearly all of humanity cannot be proved. I believe there was such a flood because I believe the Torah stories and because virtually every culture in the world had a flood story. But what matters more than whether there was a great flood are the lessons one derives from the story. That the Torah was alone in making the Flood story entirely a moral story is what matters. And it is, therefore, one of the many reasons I believe the Torah is divine in origin: mere mortals would not have made it up. No mortals anywhere else did.

NOAH WAS NOT A JEW

One of the primary reasons I believe both in the divine authorship and truthfulness of the Torah is its portrayal of Jews and non-Jews. Jews (called the "Children of Israel" in the Torah) are regularly depicted as morally flawed, and non-Jews are often depicted as morally heroic. I know of no parallel in world literature before the modern period to such a critical description of one's own people and the heroic description of members of other nations.

Noah, the good man who walked with God, the man from whom all human beings descend, is not an Israelite.

6.10 Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

6.11 The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness.

6.12 When God saw how corrupt the earth was,

Unlike the national gods of other Near Eastern cultures, who concerned themselves only with their people, the God of the Torah is concerned with the entire world.

6.12 (cont.) for all flesh had corrupted its way on earth.

6.13 God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.

That God told this to Noah is yet another distinguishing aspect of the Torah story. “In contrast to the gods of the Babylonian flood account, who keep their decisions secret from any person so that all will be killed, God takes Noah into his confidence.”⁶

As noted above, there was no purpose to human life when humanity was evil. Therefore, God destroyed the world and resolved to start again with someone who is good and to whom He would entrust a basic moral code. This is yet another argument on behalf of Noah’s exceptional goodness.

6.14 Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

The Hebrew word for ark, *tevah*, is also used to describe the basin that Moses’s mother builds for her baby son (Exodus 2:3). In both stories, God navigates the ark, directing it in accordance with His divine plan. An ark, therefore, differs from other vessels in that it is steered by God.

The Hebrew word *gopher* is not mentioned anywhere else in the Torah. Nor is it found in other ancient Semitic languages. For this reason, we do not know what kind of wood it is.

6.15 This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits.

The dimensions of the vessel are given explicitly and, according to scholars, correspond roughly to a length of 450 feet (135 meters) a width of seventy-five feet (twenty-three meters), and a height of forty-five feet (fourteen meters) with a displacement of forty-three thousand tons.

6.16 Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks.

6.17 For My part, I am about to bring the Flood—waters upon the earth—to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.

6.18 But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives.

Noah is instructed to take only his family with him on the ark. Clearly God mistrusts the moral character of other people.

6.19 And of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female.

6.20 From birds of every kind, cattle of every kind, every kind of creeping thing on earth, two of each shall come to you to stay alive.

The categories of creatures needing refuge on the ark include only land-based species. Water-dwelling creatures are absent from this part of the story because, as implied in Genesis 7:22, they weren't imperiled by flood waters.

IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOW PEOPLE TREAT ANIMALS AND HOW THEY TREAT PEOPLE?

6.21 For your part, take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them."

Noah and his family were responsible for feeding the animals on the ark. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, a twentieth-century Orthodox rabbi known by the title of his Torah commentary, *Oznayim l'Torah* ("Ears to the Torah"), speculates that since Noah and his family would have been required to spend much of their time tending to the animals, they had to be consistently kind. The ark, therefore, might have served to train them to function in a new world where people would act kindly—at least toward animals.

However, this raises the interesting question of the relationship between kindness to animals and kindness to humans.

Most people today assume that kindness to animals leads people to act kindly to people. Though it sounds intuitively correct, there is little evidence to support this notion. It is undeniably true that cruelty to animals usually leads to cruelty to people. Children who act sadistically toward animals often become violent adults. But the converse is not true. There is no relationship between kind treatment of animals and kind treatment of people. The Nazis provided perhaps the clearest example. The Nazi regime was so pro-animal it outlawed medical experiments on animals (vivisection). Yet the very same regime performed grotesque medical experiments on live, non-anaesthetized Jews and other prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. The Nazi love for animals was such that Stanford University historian Robert Proctor, in his book, *The Nazi War on Cancer*, includes a Nazi newspaper cartoon depicting animals giving a Heil-Hitler salute to the Nazi leader Hermann Goering.⁷

It is undeniably true that cruelty to animals usually leads to cruelty to people. But the converse is not true. There is no relationship between kind treatment of animals and kind treatment of people.

Having said that, and as will be noted elsewhere in the commentary, the Torah repeatedly demands the kind treatment of animals. To cite two examples, both unique to Torah legislation, Exodus 20:10, the Fourth Commandment, legislates a weekly day of rest for animals, while Deuteronomy 25:4 forbids the muzzling of an ox while it is working in the field.

WHY DIDN'T NOAH ARGUE WITH GOD?

6.22 Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did.

Many people have criticized Noah for not uttering a word in protest. They negatively compare his complete silence on being told God will destroy all of

humanity with Abraham's long argument with God when God told him He would destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18:16-33).

I find this criticism of Noah unpersuasive. If the world was as evil as the Torah states and if Noah knew it, why would he argue for sparing humanity rather than trust God's judgment that the only way to make a kinder world necessitated eradication of all evil people?

Moreover, once Abraham was assured by God there weren't even ten good people in Sodom, he, like Noah, kept silent.

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The full book includes Dennis Prager's writings on all key themes and questions surfaced in Genesis, including:

Man-Made or God-Made: Why It Matters
Who Created God?
Do Science and Genesis Conflict?
Why God Is Depicted in Male Terms
It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone
What Does It Mean When Man Becomes like God?
When Good People Have Bad Children
Why Didn't Abraham Argue with God?
What Does Belief in God Mean?
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