

## A Flood of Justice: The Scope of Justice in the Flood Narrative (Gen. 6:5–9:19)

Merilyn E. K. Clark

*Charles Sturt University, Australia*

---

### Abstract

The scope of justice in the Hebrew Bible is often human-centred. Humankind is given pre-eminence, and God's responses are judged according to human values. However the flood story in Gen. 6:5–9:19 offers a very different view of justice. It locates justice within a complex web of relationships between God, humans, other life-forms and the earth itself. The creator-otherness of God permeates the story. The justice codified in the Noahic covenant takes into account the differing natures and resultant vulnerabilities inherent in the relationships between these differing participants. It is a justice that accepts the human condition, the human capacity for evil, violence and corruption, but seeks to limit its propensity to corrupt creation through regulation and by ceding to humans the responsibility for policing these regulations.

### Keywords

justice, web of life, ecological justice, inclusivity, interdependence, Gen. 6:5–9:19

### Introduction

One of the great prophetic calls in the Hebrew Bible is for Israel to be a people of justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream' (Amos 5:24).<sup>1</sup> In his book, *The Genesis of Justice*, Alan Dershowitz, a Professor of Law at Harvard University and a teacher within the Jewish community, contends that Israel's fundamental disposition to justice and the beginnings of 'a legal code' that came to shape Israel's system of justice were laid down in Genesis.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>) Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup>) Alan Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice: Ten Stories of Biblical Injustice that Led to the Ten*

‘Justice’ is a slippery word. There is much debate about its aims, scope and applicability, but there is consensus that, at its heart, justice is relational. E. Clinton Gardner argues, for example, that ‘justice is concerned fundamentally with relationships with ‘the other’’.<sup>3</sup> For Gardner, ‘the other’ appears to be largely confined to humanity, so that justice is focused on human relationships. In the Hebrew texts, there is also a profound sense that justice is about the other and the flourishing of relationships in lively and enlivening community. Walter Brueggemann states: ‘Israel is understood as a community that is to be preoccupied with the well-being of the neighbour, and is to be prepared to exercise public power for the sake of the neighbour, even when that exercise of public power is against established interests’.<sup>4</sup> Further, justice is closely linked both to the concept of obedience to God, through the covenants, and to the codes of law that grew up around these covenants. Faithfulness to God, faithfulness to one another and righteousness are also keystone markers of the relational character of justice. However, within some scriptural texts, the scope of justice is broader than humanity and its relationship to God. The boundaries of community sometimes become blurred, extending beyond humanity, for ultimately the human community must flourish within creation. The viability of the ecological community, the network of living things, underpins the viability of all communities of creatures who make their home within creation. In Genesis 1–3 the dynamics of interrelationships between humans, animals, plants and the earth are explored. A failure in one level of relationship threatens the others for the plants sustain all living creatures and the ground itself sustains and shapes all life. Israel never loses its sense of creational connectedness. Psalm 19:1 exclaims, ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God’, while Psalm 104:14 declares, ‘You make the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for humans to use’. As Gardner concedes, ‘While the divine will is typically disclosed in commandments and law, these are grounded finally in the creating, ordering, and renewing activity of God in history’.<sup>5</sup>

In exploring the parameters and paradigms of justice within the Scriptures, scholars have wrestled with standards of attitudes and behaviour that seem to

---

*Commandments and Modern Law* (New York: Warner Books, 2000), see chapter 1, especially pp. 6 and 19–20, and also see chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> E. Clinton Gardner, *Justice and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 424.

<sup>5</sup> Gardner, *Justice and Christian Ethics*, p. 29.

‘vary substantially in level’<sup>6</sup> in Israel’s stories and laws; hence, they applaud some, denounce others and struggle at times with the tenet that Yahweh is the God of justice. The critique of justice is often centred on, indeed limited to, the human situation, and from within that scope God is judged as simply another participant. Dershowitz’s analysis follows this approach. In this article, the contribution of the flood narrative to the debate is explored. My reading is a rhetorical-critical reading of the final form of the text. I argue that a close reading of the flood narrative radically challenges both a concept of justice that is human-centred and one in which God is simply another participant in the justice system.

### **The Dershowitz Thesis**

In *The Genesis of Justice*, Dershowitz argues that ‘the Jewish Bible teaches about justice largely through examples of injustice and imperfection. Genesis challenges the reader to react, to think for him- or herself, even to disagree’.<sup>7</sup> Through ten stories Dershowitz analyses how injustices arise and explores how those stories progressively sharpen the case for justice and result in a codification of law to sustain a just judicial system. In his discussion Dershowitz judges God to be too ‘soft’ on Cain over his murder of Abel, arguing that God’s failure to deter crime precipitates the breakdown of order that ultimately results in the flood.<sup>8</sup> With respect to the flood story, Dershowitz argues that God overreacts to evil, but learns from his mistakes and intentionally begins to establish just processes.<sup>9</sup> In exploring God’s actions in the flood story, Dershowitz draws attention to God’s: ‘failure to deal with it in a just manner; His eventual realization that He did wrong; His promise not to make the same mistake twice; and His enactment of a legal code to punish individual wrongdoing’.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Dershowitz’s approach to the flood story exemplifies the practice of limiting the scope of justice to humanity, of judging God on the same basis as humans and of ignoring the story’s treatment of the animals and the very earth itself. This raises some serious concerns about the application or scope of

---

<sup>6</sup> John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55 and 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

justice; in particular, whether God as creator of all creation can be legitimately confined to rules of justice applicable only to humanity and the extent of God's responsibility, as creator of the whole complex interrelated system of creation, towards that creation. Humans are one of many life-forms that live upon the earth. Indeed, the text of the creation story (especially Gen. 1–3) reveals linguistically the inextricably close relationship between the ground, the *adamah*, which gives form to the human, the *adam*, and which sustains the *adam* through the plants and trees it nourishes, and which receives back into itself the *adam* upon its death.<sup>11</sup> All of creation, animate and inanimate, is integrally interrelated. If humans and other life-forms are to thrive, then the quality of inanimate creation is vital, for the state of the *adamah* (the soil) and the condition of water and air are crucial to the survival of all living things. Since creation is relational, then, we have to ask: whether justice should be limited to humanity and its concerns; whether the value of animals is to be determined by a human-focused utilitarian perspective; whether animals have any value outside of their usefulness to humans; what value animals have to God; what it would mean to treat the earth itself with due respect; whether the concept of justice can be applied to the earth itself. I suggest that the limitation of the scope of justice to humanity already represents a failure of justice.

Arguments for the privileged and controlling position of humanity in creation often cite the blessing in Gen. 1:28: 'God blessed them [humankind], and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue it*; and *have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'.<sup>12</sup> However, the Hebrew words for 'subdue' (*kabash*) and 'have dominion over' (*radah*) are neither neutral nor comforting words. *Kabash* 'points to harsh control',<sup>13</sup> carrying with it a sense of violence, rape and pillage (see, for example, Jer. 34:11; Neh. 5:5; 2 Sam. 8:11; Est. 7:8; Num. 32:22). *Radah* is linked to kingly rule, Israel's experience of which was highly contentious and tension-ridden. While it is tempting to interpret *radah* positively, its juxtaposition to the imperative to subdue the earth establishes a tension which 'excludes a purely peaceful

<sup>11</sup> In pursuing some exegetical arguments in this article, it is important to use transliterated Hebrew words, so that wordplay in the Hebrew, lost in translation, is kept alive. The use of italicized transliteration in place of Hebrew aims to maximize the number of readers who can follow the nuances of my argument.

<sup>12</sup> Italicized words within biblical citations reflect my emphases.

<sup>13</sup> Norman C. Habel, 'Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1', in Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds, *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 34–48 at p. 46.

interpretation'.<sup>14</sup> As Jay McDaniel argues, 'the theme of dominium has meant domination rather than care; and... has lent itself to attitudes of separation from and superiority over the rest of creation'.<sup>15</sup> *Kabash* and *radah* are words associated with conquest, as people or nations subdue others and acquire dominion over them.

The flood story offers a very different view of justice. It locates justice within a complex web of relationships between God, humans, other life-forms and the earth itself. Justice is tailored to fit each class of participant, taking into account their differing natures and the resulting vulnerabilities inherent in their relationships. However, God's creator status permeates the narrative and humankind, though important, is not pre-eminent.

### The Flood Story

The flood story opens with God's assessment of the state of the earth, and it stands in stark contrast to Genesis 1, where God approves of the creation.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the sixth day of creation, the biblical narrator observes: 'God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). Yet at the beginning of the flood narrative, when God again views creation, a radically different assessment results: 'The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually' (Gen. 6:5). The capacity for evil appears to be an intrinsic part of being human. The dramatic turbulence of this disturbing revelation is reinforced by the progression in the sounds of the Hebrew from *rabbah ra'at* ('much evil') to the more staccato, harsher and final *raq ra'* ('only evil'). Moreover, this is not the end of God's revelatory 'seeing'; the biblical narrator continues: 'Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth' (Gen. 6:11–12). In other words, corruption and violence are pervasive, corrupting the very earth itself and every living creature. Hence, Robert Alter speaks of humankind's 'perversion

<sup>14</sup> Mark Brett, 'Earthing the Human in Genesis 1–3', in Habel and Wurst, eds, *The Earth Story in Genesis*, pp. 73–86 at p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Jay McDaniel, *With Roots and Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> The intertextual links between the flood story and the first creation story are well established. See Marilyn Clark, 'Israel Remembers: Waters of Chaos, Waters of Hope', PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University, Australia, 2004, chapter 5.

of creation'.<sup>17</sup> Since the whole system of interrelationships that sustains God's created ecology has been violated, justice is annihilated. God's response, therefore, must be understood in the context of a profoundly disturbing revelatory indictment of human activity and influence.

In the flood story, God is not brought down to a human level. God's functional status as creator of the earth is reiterated repeatedly within the text, both directly (Gen. 6:6, 7 and 7:4) and indirectly, through reference to the breath of life in all flesh (Gen. 6:7; 7:15 and 22; cf. Gen. 2:7) and to the elements within creation, such as rain, waters and wind, which God controls (Gen. 6:17; 7:4 and 8:1). God's decision to destroy all land-linked life—humans, birds, animals and 'creeping things'—is directly tied to God's creator status. The text reports: 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings *I have created*—people, together with animals, and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that *I have made them*' (Gen. 6:7).

Furthermore, the human capacity for evil also impacts upon God. Hence, the text speaks not only of God's regrets but also, more poignantly, of God's pain and anger: 'And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart' (Gen. 6:6). The Hebrew word for 'grieve' here shares the same root as the term for the pain of childbirth (Gen. 3:16). This is one of the rare exposures in Hebrew Bible texts to the inner feelings of God.

Yet in these dramatic, tension-ridden opening nine verses of the story, hope is not obliterated. The text discloses that one human being, Noah, has managed to live a life that has attracted God's favour (Gen. 6:8). Three terse clauses sketch Noah's character (Gen. 6:9). The first describes Noah as a righteous (*tsaddiq*) man. *Tsaddiq*, a word often linked to justice, contains within it a sense of the quality of a person's relationships; while *tsaddiq* is the only specific use of justice language in this story, it is a key word because it partly explains why Noah has attracted God's favour. Thus, the creator God, vitally committed to life, opts for a new start, preserving the seeds of life for the new creation from the older, corrupted creation. The new creation begins with the one in whom righteousness has been found.

New questions begin to emerge here, however, concerning: the level of responsibility God must assume for having created these corruptive and corruptible humans; whether God should destroy that which has so pervasively spoilt his good earth; the level of responsibility God has towards the

<sup>17</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 28.

non-human elements of his creation; whether God's vulnerability to the state of creation impacts on his decision to destroy it; whether God is obligated to work with that which he has created, as Dershowitz argues; whether humans should be accountable for the impact their actions have on God.<sup>18</sup> Relational issues are at the heart of these concerns, but these issues do not disappear by bringing God down to a human level, by raising humans up to divine status, or by making humankind the centre of creation. God's decision to destroy is premised on his creator-other status; God is not human, rather, creature and creator are radically different and their functionality, responsibilities and obligations differ.

Contrary to Dershowitz's view, there is no hint in the text that God's judgement is capricious, despotic or out of proportion to 'the crime'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, from a standpoint of retributive justice, the punishment and the crime are linked linguistically: the Hebrew root letters of the noun 'corruption' (*sh-ch-t*) (Gen. 6:11) are the same root letters in the verb translated 'to destroy' (Gen. 6:13), which, as Alter points out, 'inscribes a pattern of measure for measure'.<sup>20</sup> This link, this sense of proportionality needs to be acknowledged when the issue of the severity of the punishment is considered. Moreover, there is significant divine involvement in ensuring the survival of those creatures who will found the new post-flood world. God chooses a builder, designs the ark (Gen. 6:14–16), ensures that it is filled with the chosen survivors and sufficient food (Gen. 6:19–21; 7:1–4 and 7–9), encloses the living creatures within the ark (Gen. 7:16) to ensure their safety through the terrible, chaotic cosmic flood, the *mabbul*, and orders their release back to the earth after the floodwaters have gone down (Gen. 8:15–17). This *mabbul* has been seen both as a death-wielding agent and as a cleansing agent, since the Hebrew verb 'blot out' (Gen. 6:7) contains within it a connotation of cleansing.<sup>21</sup> Further, the waters not only destroy life, they also save life as they lift the remnant aboard the ark away from the place of death, the surface of the earth, the *adamah*. However this flood is understood, there is a divine concern for life to continue (Gen. 7:19 and 20), and to continue in relationships that allow thriving communities: the survivors are all called to multiply and be fruitful (Gen. 8:16–17).

<sup>18</sup> Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–6.

<sup>20</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> This point has been made by many scholars. See, for example, Bernhard Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 158.

The flood story is indeed a terrible story of how relationships within creation and between creation and creator became fractured beyond repair under the weight of evil, corruption and violence. Where just relationships systemically fail, faithful communities cannot survive, but the righteousness of one man stands and the possibility of justice is not utterly extinguished. In the flood waters the creator exacts justice by ensuring accountability for violence and evil within creation: the created order that is judged no longer redeemable is washed away and a new possibility for creation is unleashed.

### **The Noahic Covenant: A Formalization of Relationships**

The flood made a new order possible. One key difference between this new order and the first creation concerns the governing of relationships between God and creation and within creation. In the first creation, God initially adopts a ‘hands off’ approach: God rests on the seventh day and lets creation be (Gen. 2:2). An *ad hoc* regulatory framework concerning human and animal behaviour and relationships begins to emerge, in part due to problems arising.<sup>22</sup> The regulations include the institution of a vegetarian regime (Gen. 1:29–30), the denial of the right to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17) and later from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22), the institution of a hierarchical relationship between men and women (Gen. 3:16) and a more problematic relationship between humans and the rest of nature (Gen. 3:14–15 and 17–19). Dershowitz argues that ‘God, who was able to create the physical universe in just six days, finds it far more difficult to design a system of justice by which to govern His human creatures’.<sup>23</sup> However, in the post-flood world, an intentional establishment of a series of regulations to govern not only human behaviour (to which Dershowitz confines his discussion), but also animal behaviour, and indeed God’s own behaviour, will shape this new creation. At the centre of this new arrangement is the Noahic covenant: a covenant with the whole earth. With respect to the regulations, Dershowitz notes the importance of the evolution towards ‘codified rules and proportionate sanctions’.<sup>24</sup> The regulations and sanctions begin to define not only the shape and boundaries of justice but also the process of justice. In linking these law codes to justice, Dershowitz is careful to point out that any set

<sup>22</sup> Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice*, p. 204.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

of rules will have interstices, necessitating assessment on an individual case basis.<sup>25</sup> In short, justice is never fully captured in codes of law.

The Noahic covenant emphasizes life; not only human life but all life. It promises life even as death is about to erupt on a terrible scale. In the text God states:

But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you, and of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female (Gen. 6:18–19).

After the flood, the biblical account recalls: 'God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark' (Gen. 8:1), and God released all of them with this blessing: 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and yours sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh... so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth' (Gen. 8:16–17). God's actions culminate in this first covenant between God, all the flood survivors, all the living things and the earth itself (Gen. 9:9–11). In keeping with this concern for all life on earth, God promises that never again will he let floodwaters destroy all flesh, neither will the earth be destroyed again by a flood (Gen. 9:11).

Before the covenant is formally declared, however, God begins to lay the groundwork for a new social order. When God looks favourably on Noah's sacrifice (Gen. 8:20–21), God's concern for the new creation is systemic, recognizing even God's changing relationship with the earth. Despite having been so disturbed by human corruption and violence, God makes the extraordinary statement: 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, *for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth*; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done' (Gen. 8:21). In this chiasmically structured statement, the core revelation is cradled within two promises that may be viewed as statutes of limitation in terms of God's actions within God's creation. The core revelation recognizes that there has been no change in the fundamental disposition of humanity to evil (reiterating Gen. 6:5), but God's response has changed. God determines never to curse the ground (*adamah*) again because of humans (*adam*) and declares that he will never again destroy all life as he has done with the flood. According to Gerhard von

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

Rad, Gen. 8:21 is the ‘most remarkable statement of the Old Testament [Hebrew Bible] . . . almost an indulgence, an adjustment by God towards man’s sinfulness’.<sup>26</sup>

In Noah, God faced the continuing reality of the human potential for evil. Yet rather than pronouncing further judgement on humankind, God accepts the human condition; he determines to ensure the continuing cycles of the earth; he establishes regulations to begin to protect creation from human violence and corruption; he limits his right of response and he blesses all life. As Brueggemann asserts: ‘Nothing has changed in the inclination of humanity. All that has changed, decisively changed, is God’s resolve to remain a faithful creator in spite of the condition of creation. That is, God is shown to be more fully gracious and positively inclined towards the earth’.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Beginnings of a Justice System and Its Orientation**

While the web of relationships is to be re-established and life blessed with fecundity, thereby repopulating the emptied earth, Gen. 9:2 opens with the shocking and chilling declaration that Noah and his offspring will be a source of fear and dread to all creatures. The Hebrew words for ‘fear and dread’ convey a military menace. The new ordering of creation, therefore, is no return to Eden. Any anticipated fear on the part of creation towards God, for what God has done and could do, will now be directed towards humanity. Humans will not only continue to corrupt the ways of all flesh, animals, through their service to humans, might be drawn into the perpetration of injustice too. The shock of this verse is exacerbated when God gives these creatures into the hands of Noah and his descendants; that is, humans are no longer to be confined to a vegetarian diet (cf. Gen. 1:29–30 and Gen. 9:3).

This raises the question of why God would drive a wedge between those who had survived the flood. Perhaps fear and dread offer some protection to the animals from the corruptive influences of humankind and a greater chance to avoid human hunters. Whatever the basis for driving a wedge between humans and animals, there is nonetheless a serious concern for the protection of living creatures from the consequences of the human capacity for violence and corruption. Thus, in addition to instilling fear and dread of humans into

<sup>26</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 41.

animals, God lays upon humans two prohibitions to govern their behaviour; both prohibitions demand a respect for life. First, humans may not eat flesh in which life-blood remains (Gen. 9:4); that is, the killing of animals for food must be done respectfully. Secondly, the taking of human life (by humans or animals) is forbidden because humans are made in God's image (Gen. 9:5); although this accords humans special status, it does not thereby accord them priority. The second prohibition is to be enforced through the death penalty, again invoking a sense of proportionality. God, humans and other animals are interlinked in a web of relationships in each of these prohibitions.

Thus, in the prelude to the declaration of the covenant, the two promises of God are balanced by the two prohibitions applying to humans and to animals. The almost shocking acceptance of the human condition is balanced by the rift that has been opened between humans and other animals. Hence, the more complex interrelationships of the new creation are accompanied by a more complex orientation towards justice. Further, according to Von Rad, responsibility for maintaining justice has been ceded by God to humans; he states: 'man will now execute the demands of moral world order'.<sup>28</sup>

### Covenant Inclusivity and Assurance

The text is unequivocal that God's covenant is with all survivors of the flood, not solely with Noah and his descendants, stating: 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you *and* your descendants after you, *and* with every living creature that is with you . . . as many as came out of the ark' (Gen. 9:9–10). The conjunction 'and' does not prioritize but functions inclusively here, and that inclusivity is emphasized by being reiterated five more times, with minor variations:

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between *me* and *you* and *every living creature that is with you*, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant that is between *me* and *the earth* . . . I will remember my covenant that is between *me* and *you* and *every living creature of all flesh* . . . I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between *God* and *every living creature of all flesh* . . .' And God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between *me* and *all flesh that is on the earth*' (Gen. 9:12–17).

<sup>28</sup>) Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 133.

A second emphasis is also apparent in the covenant declaration. Reference to ‘the clouds’ (Gen. 9:13 and 14) recalls the horror of the flooding rains that fed the terrible flood, the *mabbul*, but against this sits the covenantal sign of a bow (Gen. 9:13 and 14). *Qeshet* is the Hebrew word for a hunting bow, a war-bow or a Bowman; though it may be translated as ‘rainbow’, we cannot remove from *qeshet* the meaning associated with its use for hunting and killing. Hence, cloud and bow form the core turning point of a chiasm:

- A God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:  
 B I have set *my bow in the clouds*,  
 A’ and it shall be a sign of the covenant that is between me and the earth’.

In these final words of assurance that end the covenant-making (Gen. 9:8–17), any fear and dread of God because of the flood is pre-empted. The sting of the bow of the destroyer is drawn by the vision of God’s bow hung in the clouds: God effectively disarms himself. As David Atkinson concludes: ‘The hostility is over: God hangs up his bow! . . . The weapon of war itself is transformed into a delight’.<sup>29</sup> Fear and dread have been deflected to the animals in relationship with humans, who will take up the bow to hunt creatures for their food.

Through these words of assurance and the imagery contained in them, the two promises of God, his statutes of limitation, are given due emphasis; ‘that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth’ (Gen. 9:11), and ‘when I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant . . . and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh’ (Gen. 9:14–15). Thus, the statutes of limitation, imposed on God by God, open and close the disclosure of the post-flood social order; they have significant relational implications and reveal an extraordinary commitment to creation, while also shaping the orientation of justice upon earth.

### Concluding Comments

The relationships between God, the earth and all living things posited in the flood story are complex: ecological concerns pervade the entire story. Both the extraordinary emphasis on inclusivity in the Noahic covenant and the address

<sup>29</sup> David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11* (Leicester & Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p. 164.

to all creation in its preamble press for an extension of the scope of justice from a narrow focus on humanity to a creation-wide perspective. There is concern for the survival and fecundity of all species that make up this web of life. While humans feature more prominently in the law codes, in recognition of the vulnerability of creation to human evil and corruption, God demands that humans bear responsibility for pursuing justice in the governance of creation.

The issue of justice is one that public theology rightly continues to address. In offering its responses, public theology draws upon 'its own biblically based theological sources';<sup>30</sup> yet, these same Scriptures may rebound to critique those responses. The tensions inherent in hermeneutical interaction between present realities, exegetical argument, theological reflection and praxis provide space for further creative and relevant input into these great debates.

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm identifies three approaches for understanding the human-nature relationship: utilitarian anthropocentrism, nature-centred approach and anthropocentrism of responsibility. He advocates the third approach as the most productive for public theology, stating: 'Anthropocentrism of responsibility acknowledges the special place of human beings in the whole of creation without legitimizing subordination, exploitation and destruction of the earth by human beings. On the contrary, anthropocentrism of responsibility involves an ethic of self-limitation of human beings in their relationship with the earth'.<sup>31</sup>

While Bedford-Strohm's approach is consistent with the thrust of the flood story, the flood story goes further, placing the creator unequivocally and significantly into the web of relationships. Humans are indeed responsible for the state of creation, but anthropocentrism of responsibility must grapple with issues of motivation and accountability. God initiates rules of justice to impact upon human to human relationships, human and animal relationships, human and earth relationships, and human and God relationships. Indeed Bedford-Strohm's 'ethic of self-limitation of human beings in their relationship with the earth' is already modelled by the creator within the story, since God recognizes God's capacity for a terrible impact on the earth and thus establishes self-imposed limitations on God's capacity to intervene in creation.

My reading of the flood story argues that the scope of justice needs to be broadened from a concern with humanity to take account of the web of life

---

<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, 'Tilling and Caring for the Earth: Public Theology and Ecology', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1 (2007), 230–48 at 232.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

which undergirds creation. Ecological justice is crucial if life is to be sustained and to flourish in all its diversity. The capacity and propensity of humanity to corrupt creation needs to be factored into any system of ecological justice. While we might persuade human communities to such a view only by emphasizing the utility of creation to humanity, the flood story declares that creation is not human-centred, that God remains concerned with creation and indeed that God is vulnerable to the state of creation. The intrinsic value of creation, then, is greater than the utility of creation to humanity, and while this might be reflected in the debate for ecological justice, ecological justice should not be seen as a side issue to discussions about justice in general. Careful reading of the Genesis flood story suggests that the debate about justice for humanity be absorbed into the broader debate for ecological justice. Moreover, the flood story challenges the boundaries of public theology, suggesting that the word 'public' be inclusive of the wider creation.

While the flood did not eliminate human evil or its effects from God's good earth, it enabled a terminally corrupted order to be washed away and a new order to be ushered in. From its very inception the new order is structured around just governance within creation. The flood was indeed a flood of justice; it was a flood for the sake of justice.