

- Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1973) has many essays on the African understanding of the self.
- 6 See the second edition of Meyer Fortes' *Oedipus and Job*, with an additional essay by Robin Horton (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
  - 7 Notably J.H.M. Beattie. See his 'On understanding ritual', in Bryan Wilson, *Rationality*, Blackwell, 1970.
  - 8 Fernandez, op. cit, pp. 304, 309.
  - 9 Robert Schreiter's statement (Schreiter, op. cit, p. 96) that 'Many African cultures do not have a story of the Fall' is true, but then many African cultures do not have myths of human origins. The majority of African myths of human origins seem to have some story of a fall.
  - 10 Fernandez, op. cit, p 341.
  - 11 Fernandez, op. cit, p 305.
  - 12 Fernandez, op. cit, p 474—5.
  - 13 See chapter 19 in Fernandez for the Bwiti practice and theory of preaching. All the forms of Bwiti studied by James Fernandez were evidently influenced by Catholicism. Some Protestant catechists had gone over to Bwiti, and one wonders what 'Protestant' Bwiti is like. Presumably it would have much more stress on the Bible, as distinct from Bible stories.
  - 14 Robin Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa* 37 (1967), 50—71, 155—8, and 'On the Rationality of Conversion', *Africa* 45 (1975), 219—235, 373—397).

## Back to the Ark

### Susan Dowell

The alarming resurgence of biblical speculation by the nuclear war-lords of the West in the last few years has drawn peace-movement Christians to sober biblical scholarship. *New Blackfriars* writers<sup>1</sup> have pioneered the reclamation of 'the most symbolically-rich eschatological language of the Bible, from Isaiah to Revelation, ... captured by abstentionist sects and a politically hostile movement' and made 'virtually unavailable to Christians who do not share those views about politics and God's action in the world'.

The question I would like to explore here is: how, if at all, can this kind of investigation, which draws on academic exegesis but clearly goes beyond it, also help us to reclaim and wrestle with symbols and stories which superficially appear to be of a different kind, namely, the symbols and stories which speak of our earliest beginnings? With the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel? This might be termed the 'pop' culture of the Bible, not being seen as belonging to the specialist or to any political faction with a biblical axe to grind, but as the mythic heritage of all—timeless, beloved of Hollywood as the stuff of Epic spectacle. It is, however, the area which has long been of interest to the Western Women's Movement, because it has come to reckon with the power of these foundational myths over our culture's perceptions of gender. Feminists see *these* myths as captured and distorted by patriarchal religion and hence by patriarchal power in general.

These two biblical quests—which might be termed the disarmament/specialist quest and the feminist/cultural quest—would seem widely divergent in purpose and method. I suggest that this need not be so, and that feminists committed to the peace movement should seek a biblically and theologically informed synthesis. They should do this, I would argue, for two reasons. Firstly, just as Jesus (and most of the New Testament writers) shared an apocalyptic framework of thought, so too did they share this symbolic backdrop to Hebrew faith, claiming both of them in radical and often subversive ways. Secondly, the early texts speak to us of far more than Creation and Fall, Male and Female. They speak, too, of catastrophe and survival: of God's purging of the 'evil empires' that were seen to have arisen in the mists of pre-history:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth ... But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen. 5:5—7)

I wonder to what extent today's nuclear mentality is perpetuated by the very homely familiarity which has cloaked the awesomeness of this narrative; by the unspoken assumptions that lie embedded in this tangle of myth and memory. If apocalyptic writings can be used to justify fire power as part of the divine armoury, Noah and his Ark suggest the blessedness and godliness of the bunker; they suggest the rapture, too, the lifting up of the chosen ones into heaven (as indicated in I Thess 4:16f.).

For feminists, the mundane everyday damage and distortion wrought by sexism is an all-pervasive element of the nuclear society's violence: both the sexism manifest in the overt denigration of femaleness and that manifest in women's absence from the process of myth-telling

and history-telling. The last of these is (as I hope to show here) signalled in quite specific and primary ways in the biblical account of the Flood.

Chapters 1—11 of Genesis are seen by commentators as the prologue to Israel's recorded history, written in the light of that history and reflecting the Hebrew religious consciousness of the sixth to the third century B.C. Noah's story marks the middle of this section, which, as a whole, handles themes of common currency in the religious thought of the ancient Near East: Creation and Fall, male and female, morality and eternal life. Descriptions of a disastrous flood tally with the findings of 20th-century archaeology.

Noah's story fuses with the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, in which Gilgamesh seeks his ancestor Utanapishtim, Noah's counterpart, who has likewise survived the Flood time. The Gilgamesh story illustrates the futility of the human quest for immortality. Gilgamesh was betrayed (by a snake!): only the gods can achieve everlasting life. The Old Testament version of the story is told to underline the basic tenet of biblical faith, monotheism. It is preceded by a familiar tale of rape—the rape of the 'daughters of men' by 'the sons of God' (Gen 6:1f.), which is given new meaning by being placed as pretext for the destruction, thus illustrating the evil that besets not only mortal men but all non-monotheistic expressions of the divine. (Patristic commentary, by changing the 'rape' to a 'seduction' and thus marking these daughters of Eve as sexual temptresses, obscured the point that the biblical authors were making.)

Noah's story also teaches that judgment is not the only or the last word of God. It teaches of God's favour and faithfulness to his chosen vessels. Noah and his family are spared and his Ark bears the created order onwards from its mythic beginning in the Garden to the edge of history, onto a real map—the Chaldean plain—and into a more realistic time-scale. The covenantal promise is given to and through the whole creation:

... neither will I smite any more every living thing as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

(Gen. 8:21f.)

No more water. The fire—or nuclear winter—next time.

Biblical faith calls us to engage imaginatively in its given symbolism, to re-member and tell stories, our own, around these awesome settings. In our women's quest we return again and again to the first beginning in Eden. We have some trouble here with indigestible spare ribs and conflicting accounts (Gen 1:27 versus 2:21—23). But we have Eve named 'mother of all that lives', who speaks to us and for us of innocence and curiosity. We have Lilith, too, who lurks outside in other texts and our own imaginings, pointing to possibilities beyond the patriarchal world.

So many dreams and visions can be backprojected onto that Garden; romantic matriarchy, primitive communism, can both be bathed in the light of that dawn.

Not so with this second beginning. The gender message of the biblical Noah story is rigidly patriarchal. Noah's wife, along with her 'son's wives', has no part at all in the drama—nor has any woman. There is no 'usable past' here for women. Mrs Noah is the root of an enduring line of unnamed women of the scriptures. Noah's blood-family is saved by his righteousness and his far-sighted planning for its protection and for the preservation of his line, his own. Protect and survive is the slogan; here is the first fall-out shelter.

Clan and family chauvinism, the primary *raison-d'être* of patriarchy and militarism, is undoubtedly sacralised by the power of epic stories like this. The absolute value accorded the so-called 'traditional' family, and the claim to be its only 'protector', is the emotional glue that holds the Born-again Right package together. Peaceniks, feminists, are the dupes of godless communism, and are, of course, the enemies of this Family. But is the conservative dream of a tidy nuclear society, based on the nuclear family, really endorsed by the Bible's teachings?

The primacy of the blood family as a religious and social unit is subverted in Old Testament prophecy, in the words and deeds of Jesus and in the ways the early Church perceived and organised together: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother,' says Jesus (Mark 3:35); 'And all that believed were together' in a new kind of family, we are told in Acts 2:44. Furthermore, any claims of the chosen, the survivors and the victorious, to be the exclusive recipients of God's care and compassion are undercut in both biblical and post-biblical Hebraic tradition: 'The ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said, "My children lie drowned in the sea, and you would *sing*?"', we are told by Rabbi Johann.

So how *do* we visualise, re-imagine, the Ark? Do we see it as part of the problem (sin) or part of the solution (grace and mercy)?

In the biblical story, the great ship ploughs forward until dry land appears. The new earth of Ararat must, like the old, be filled—but now by creatures who can never tread it in the harmony or variety that existed before the Flood. Now 'the dread of you and the fear of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moves upon the earth' (Gen. 9:2) ... words that have spelt dismay to many a conservationist and given rise to some real suspicion of Jewish-Christian culture being the author of ecological exploitation; words speaking, surely, of sin and fallenness. How strange it is, then, that most biblical commentary is so cheerfully triumphalistic: speaking of the New Age born from the surging chaos for all the world as if the pre-Flood

creation were the formless uncreated mass of the first beginning. Such an approach makes light of the burden of sin, human and political as well as ecological, borne by the Ark from the old age to the new, the burden of fratricidal hatred and fatherly favouritism which were the seeds of the racism that fragmented the human family.

How, must we ask, does a feminist analysis help us to discern and overcome the distortions in the narrative itself and in the way it has been told and used? How does the Noah story in particular manifest the patriarchal bias which feminists claim to be the roots of our culture's life-denying direction?

Recent feminist writings have focussed on the links between sexist oppression and ecological exploitation; on the potential of a woman-centred theory and practice of non-violence. For me, woman's silence in this story bespeaks—as traditional commentary fails to do—its shadow side, it speaks of limitation and loss. The poet Susan Griffin writes of the conquest of woman and the subjugation of 'nature': 'He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth, that the dead sing through her mouth. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger.' Genesis 9:18f. says 'And the sons of Noah went forth from the Ark ... and of them was the whole earth overspread.'

It was over a century ago that the Abolitionist and feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to compile the *Woman's Bible*. In those days the disgrace of Noah's son Ham was invoked to justify the enslavement of the black races. It was foolish, wrote Cady Stanton, to belittle the Bible's influence, to 'regard it simply as the history of a rude people in a barbarous age'. Today feminist exegesis continues to be a way to connect our twentieth-century selves, our personal sense of loss and alienation, to these ancient messages. We study these patriarchal texts in order to hear the silences, as it were, to begin to re-imagine what has been denied so that it can be reclaimed, transformed and woven into a living tradition.

This task is necessarily different both in its nature and its methodology, from the task of reclaiming for the peaceable Kingdom the complex apocalyptic teachings of later texts. The peace-movement exegetist is dealing with the written word, with what has been captured as authoritative teaching, in the context of highly developed conflictual theologies in the intertestamental and first-century world. For both forms of speculation involve cautious contextual and cross-cultural analysis.

It is widely recognised that the early biblical stories were extracted from the melting pot of prehistorical and early historical consciousness. The Flood catastrophe is a universal theme in these stories, as well as a verifiable happening. The same can be said of the transition, in the first

millennium B.C., from maternal to male-dominated systems. This universal albeit mysterious phenomenon is one that is vital to our understanding of the struggles and tensions, territorial and theological, that the Hebrew people had with their conquered and conquering neighbours. Yahwist faith both challenged and reinforced the surrounding cultures and these tensions informed the biblical process and vision.

In Sumerian, Babylonian and Canaanite religion the Goddess plays a major part in the drama of the earth's rescue and renewal. She does not, as is often supposed, merely represent Fertility as Creatrix, but is also imaged as ruler, redemptrix, restorer and protector of cosmic harmony. The Hebrew name of God—and humanity—as male 'indicates a sharp departure from all previous human consciousness', writes Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>2</sup>. Although we have no clear extra-biblical texts showing us *how* this departure occurred, we have some clear ideas as to *why*. Ruether continues:

It is possible that the social origins of male monotheism lie in nomadic, herding societies. The cultures lacked the female gardening role and tended to image God as the Sky-Father. Nomadic religions were characterised by exclusivism and an aggressive hostile relationship to the agricultural people of the land and their religions.

When the Hebrew nomads returned to their promised land from their long sojourn in Egypt and the desert it was tempting—indeed, it seemed inevitable—that the people would seek the agricultural blessings believed to be bestowed by the older marriage of God and Goddess, in other words, of Baal and Anath. The Goddess had to be absorbed into the new relationship with Yahweh as her Lord. Monotheism demanded that her function be abrogated to himself, and to the maleness in which he was imaged.

A grasp of this complex background (which I have, of course, only outlined here) is foundational to feminist theology. Understanding woman's exclusion means understanding the means whereby it has been perpetuated and the terms under which it has arisen. Such understanding illuminates the alienating image—so dramatically present in the Noah story—of the Hero talking man-to-man with his Godfather. We come to see that there is neither a cosmic, divinely-authorized male plot against women nor can we dismiss the problem of sexist texts as the (now resolved) problem of rude peoples in barbarous ages.

Biblical feminists, by definition, are more positive than, say, post-Christian religious feminists about the monotheism which is the core of these narratives' messages. Noah's story, incomplete as it undoubtedly is, nevertheless preserves the theme and promise of co-creation established, and partially lost, in Eden. Unlike his contemporaries, this

God frees slaves, speaks of and for subjugated peoples, and promotes the nature/renewal drama to the stage of history and the political process. Here his followers, the preservers of these myths and stories, can claim his image and his purposes for the redemption of all the wearisome processes—lies and denials—that they inherit across time and space.

And here the image and likeness of the Ark persists. While many of us, contemplating the modern equivalent of this bunker/survival system, would ask (given its proposed design and cost today) where we would seek—or be given—a place on board, we still can claim the power and potential of this symbol.

The Ark has come to mean far more than the survival of the fittest or the best. It is the Ark of Salvation, the Holy of Holies of Hebrew spirituality. Christian culture has taken up and expended the *inclusive*, salvational elements of the story. The Ark represents *Oikoumene*, the known world, and so has been adopted by the World Council of Churches as its logo. It has inspired the design of church buildings: the great naves—*naves/ships*—and the soaring masts/towers, of our architectural treasures. It is interesting to contemplate the material spatial reality of these structures: the Church is built as the Ark *upside down*. This opens up rich possibilities for prayer, linking us to God's children who lie drowned. We are one with the whole creation, past and present, and the dead sing through our mouth.

This is far better, surely, than the image we have inherited in the visual arts. The floating nuclear family, bobbing merrily along the Sunday-school frieze, has inspired some pretty unhelpful theology. In an anti-feminist article entitled 'The Body is the Book'<sup>3</sup>, Susannah Herzl likens Noah's Ark to the nativity stable. She sees it as receiving and carrying actively within itself whatever is poured in. 'It carries these embryos until they are transformed into something new and then released into life.' A beguiling description, but can, should, the two be *equated*? We lose the truth of the image if we claim too much for it.

The Sunday-school child in me sees a little floating zoo—a world with no griffins, no unicorns, one where all that was weird and wonderful has been submerged. But there is another image, too, that we have inherited. Now, as a grown woman, my lifeline to the story's potential lies in its robust, irreverent treatment in drama, from the mediaeval mystery plays to the moderns. Here, at least, we enjoy a few laughs at Noah's expense; Noah the fusspot, the bossy born-again boat-builder. (My own dramatic retelling, inspired by Greenham and the peace camps, would be one in which the patriarch himself brings about the flood. He cuts down the trees on the hillside, stripping it bare so that the soil is washed away, the mountain crumbles, and there is—as happens—a flood. He takes over the whole settlement, the common land

where people lived and planted their crops, felling the trees to build the boat even bigger, to build a high stockade and to shut out the people, their fear and their mockery.)

In the traditional *Noyes Fluddes* of drama, Mrs Noah is given a voice, albeit by misogynist playwrights. She pours scorn on Noah's super-marine. She won't go aboard, she says, and has to be dragged on by her kinsmen. She'd rather stay with her women companions, her 'gossips'. (It was the alewife in the Gilgamesh epic who warned the hero of his quest's futility!) She loves the messy old world as it is, as her true home. We can see perhaps in that refusal the seeds of resistance to the bunker mentality. Were those women pointing to better ways than Noah's to attend and hear the word of God—from the earth itself, the rain and the trees, from the dying and those doomed not to survive in the patriarchal world?

We move, as women and as the Church, to the edge of the drama. We watch and we wait during the practice-launch.

We do not know, yet, how this story will end.

- 1 See especially Roger Ruston, 'Apocalyptic and the Peace Movement', *New Blackfriars*, May 1986, 204—215. Also Roger Ruston & Angela West, *Preparing for Armageddon*, Pax Christi 1985.
- 2 Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*. Beacon Press 1983, 53.
- 3 Susannah Herzel, in *Man, Woman and Priesthood*, ed. by Peter Moore, SPCK 1978. Herzel's piece has frequently drawn the fire of Christian feminists for its biological determinism—the female as vessel for new growth (and, presumably, the male as pilot of the boat). It draws mine here for its presentation of the Ark as a universal, inclusive sign of grace. The two criticisms are not, of course, unconnected.