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THE IMPORT OF THE FLOOD: A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF "NACHAM" IN GENESIS 6:6-7[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Since God does nothing desultorily, what could be the import of the flood in Genesis 6? The flood must have been sent for a unique purpose and import other than punishment of sin. The New Testament itself did not present it as punishment on humanity. The understanding of the import of the Flood is not truly seen in verses 1-5 and 11-12, but in verses 6-7, precisely in the expression "it repented the Lord that he had made man" (KJV). The expression itself can mislead unless interpreted properly, and the key word in the expression is "repented". The research employed a linguistic approach to the study of "repented" in determining its actual meaning in the expression. The finding was that the word does not really mean what English translations rendered it, and consequently the significance of the expression in the flood account has been hidden. The research pointed out that the linguistic understanding of nacham in the expression reveals the actual import of the flood.

1. Introduction

We believe that God does nothing desultorily, so the flood was sent for a specific purpose. Determining this very purpose has been an issue in the flood account. The most common suggestion is that it was sent as a punishment toward mankind. The proponents of this universal view would always quote Genesis 6:1-5 and 11-12. So, it was a response from an angry God. This has raised a lot of questions toward God, ranging from how best to present God (with respect to this passage) - is he a despot, capricious? To how best to understand such an action - was it intended for man's good? Of what benefit was the flood to both God and man?

On the contrary, this research posits that the flood was God's kind gesture toward the problem of Creation, especially man. What is forming the background of this theological strand is my belief in universality of the flood. If it were a local flood, there would not be any concrete reason to believe that it was sent for such a special purpose. To understand the import of the Flood, we must look beyond verses 1-5 and 11-12 to the theological place of verses 6-7, precisely in the expression "it repenteth the Lord that he had

made man". Analysis of the expression is revelatory of the import of the flood.

2. Theological implications of the Expression

The literary presentation of the expression "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth" has a lot of theological implications. Scholars of the Bible have observed this. Goldingay acknowledges that the English translation "repent" has a negative connotation especially when referring to God, so he prefers translating the word as "releat", claiming that the idea of God relenting is found throughout the Old Testament in the examples of Jonah (Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2), Moses (Ex 32:12, 14) and Joel (Joel 2:12-14) (2006, 90).

The theological implications are: First, it puts a doubt on the foreknowledge of God. It simply means that God did not know, as a matter of fact, the end right from the beginning. This belief is known as "Open Theism," which in essence asserts that God does not know everything that will take place in the future (Maier III, 2004).

Second, it would also mean that it was a big mistake creating man - which

God later realised - in effect, God is not perfect, he can make mistakes, and can also repent from them (Goldingay, 2006). Third, it doubts the omniscience of God - God does not know everything. Fourth, it contradicts a scriptural assertion concerning the immutability of God. Norman L Geisler (2010) believes that such understanding and rendition of nacham presents a contradiction in Scripture, namely, with 1 Samuel 15:29.

3. Word Study

The Hebrew word translated "repenteth" (or regretted, grieved, sorry)" does not really mean what our English Versions rendered it to mean. If it were, then that would put the testimony of the scripture concerning the incommunicable attributes of God to doubt. The etymology of the meaning of nacham, as given by Strong's concordance, is: 1) a primitive root, properly, to sigh (breathe strongly), 2) by implication, to be sorry, to pity (i.e. in a favourable sense), to console or rue (reflexively); 3) to avenge (oneself - unfavorably). It is both an onomatopoeic term implying difficulty in breathing, hence "pant," "sigh," and "groan," (Dement, 1988) and an anthropomorphic term implying a physical display of one's feeling like "sorrow", "remorse", and even "satisfaction" (Prussic, 2005).

It is from this origin or root that the meanings given to the various translations came. A look at the renditions of the Hebrew nacham in our English versions better points out the different meanings assigned to it the more: kJV = "and it repented the Lord that he had made man ...", ESV = "and the Lord regretted that he had made man ...", NIV = "the Lord regretted that he had made human beings ...", AMP = "and the Lord regretted that he had made man ...", and Targum has it as "repented". If the English versions did not get it well, what should be the actually meaning of the word?

The philological background of nacham:

Philology deals with studying the relationship between languages and words in ancient resources and documents (Marsh, 2018, 111). Marsh, Who did word studies on *shub* and *nacham*, said concerning the latter that the Hebrew verb root נחם (nacham) has cognate parallels or the same linguistic derivations in the Akkadian, Northwest and Southwest Semitic language groups (2018, 111).

Fabry and Simian-Yofre as cited in Marsh (2018) held that the Hebrew word נחם is not directly found in Akkadian, notwithstanding it might be derived from the Akkadian root nh, of which the Hebrew term נוּחַ (nuah) is a definite derivative (2018). Though both share the meaning, "rest", nacham

as "to comfort" may be a "logical expansion of the Akkadian and Hebrew terms (Donnell, as cited by Marsh, 2018).

Further, concerning its relationship with the Ugaritic, which is closely related to biblical Hebrew, having the same tri-literal root נחם (nacham), meaning "to console", Davis, as cited in Marsh, maintained that the emotional aspect is the content of the Hebrew root (2018). As for the relationship of נחם with Arabic *nahama*, Marsh pointed out a lot of controversies raised by scholars, and concluded that a safe statement is that it seems there was a relationship to the Arabic *nahama*, so that Hebrew נחם indicates deep breathing of distress or relief (2018).

The meaning of nacham in Hebrew Old Testament:

The word nacham is found in four verbal forms which are often grouped into two categories because of their similarities.

1. The piel and pual verb forms

The piel verbs are active in voice and mainly serve to intensify the simple action of the qal stem, while the pual verbs are the passive forms of the piel stems. So, instead of the subject doing the action (piel) the action is being done to the subject (pual) (Ellis, (2006

The question of the context for the usages of the two, Parunak (1975) believes that it is the contexts that show their usage, for when they are used in the Old Testament the context regularly points to some calamity, such as death, danger, misfortune, or divine anger (Genesis 37:35; Psalm 23:4; Job 2:11; Isaiah 12:1) which is pacified by God. The Old Testament viewed hardships and misfortune as divine consequences of sin, and viewed God as the one who brings relief to his people (Parunak, 1975). Hence, God is the subject of the nacham of the verb forms.

2. The niph'al and hithpael verb forms

The Niph'al stem is used to express simple action with either a passive or reflexive voice. Whatever a verb means in the Qal stem, it becomes passive or reflexive in the Niph'al stem. While the hithpael stem is used to express an intensive action with a reflexive voice (Practico and Van Pelt, 2009). That is something done by one to oneself (hithpael). Genesis 6:6 put it, nacham, in the niph'al, that is, in passive form "it repented the Lord ..."

In summary here, the word translated "repented" is the Hebrew verb נחם nacham, which occurred 108 times in the Old Testament, forty-eight times in the niph'al stem, fifty-one times in the piel stem, twice in the pual stem, and seven times in the hithpael stem (Heinz-Josef Simian-Yofre, as cited in Walter

A. Maier III). It is difficult to determine with precision how nacham niphall was used in the Old Testament, since it was used about forty-eight times, and the contexts differed. Any attempt made here would only be a conjecture.

4. Septuagint (LXX) Translation of nacham

One of the sources of knowledge for the understanding of Old Testament scripture and words is the Septuagint Translation. This Translation was done by the selected Jewish scribes and scholars in Alexandria Egypt, approximately 200 years before Christ. It represents, to a considerable degree, the way the Jews themselves understood the Old Testament scripture. Consequently, a study of its Translation of nacham would throw more light to our quest.

The Septuagint (LXX) uses παρακαλέω "to summon, call upon, invite, urge, request, comfort," and possibly "try to console" or "conciliate," to translate the niphall, piel, pual, and hithpael of nacham. It uses μετανοέω "to change one's mind," "repent," only for the niphall, several times in connection with Yahweh, sometimes with regard to Israel. The LXX uses ἐλέεω "to have mercy" or "pity," "be merciful," four times for the piel and once for the niphall. It uses παύω "to stop, cause to stop, relieve" five times for the niphall (Simian-Yofre, as cited in Maier III, 2004, 134).

Interestingly, the LXX uses none of these Greek verbs for nacham, niphall, in Genesis 6:6, but renders nacham with the verbal root ἐνθυμέομαι "to reflect (on), consider, think." Further, in the LXX Genesis 6:6,7 are the only verses where ἐνθυμέομαι (enthumeomai) is used for nacham. Maier III believes that the LXX translators wanted to avoid the impression in this passage (Gen. 6:6) that God regretted, was sorry, or changed his mind. I do not think this conjecture appropriate, for the LXX translators were experts and must have done justice to the selection of words.

The verb ἐνθυμέομαι is from a compound of *en* and *thumos*; and retains the primary meaning "to meditate upon, reflect upon, ponder, think". In effect, what God did was not "to repent or grieve or regret" that he had made man, but "reflect upon, think about" the condition of the man that he had made. ALU (2019, 29) having studied the word nacham suggested that "regret or repent should not be alternate translations for *nhm* in Genesis 6:6-7". Alu goes on to say that "An English verb to capture this nuance is hard to come up with. Consequently, one would resort to circumlocution ..." (2019, 29).

This meaning of the Greek verb ἐνθυμέομαι is in line with the origin/root meaning of the Hebrew נָחַם (nacham) - "to sigh (breathe strongly); by implication, to be sorry, to pity (i.e. in a favourable sense)". The LXX captured rather the root meaning of nacham, which means that God sighed and pitied the condition of the man that he had created (in a favourable sense).

5. The Import of the flood: Summary of the Findings

If the discovery of the linguistic understanding of nacham is true, then the flood was rather God's response to the situation of the man he had made. A typical understanding of the situation of man at the time is very important. Mankind had been led astray in the grossest way, and could not help or remedy it - every inclination of his heart was evil. Also, some of the fallen angels did not keep their place, but intermarried with mankind - sons of God married daughters of men. Lastly, strange beings were engendered from such unions - altering the original creation of God (1-5) and left the earth in sheer violence (11-12).

At this point in time, God looked at the condition and situation of the man he had made, and sighed in pity (nacham). He pondered over it (nacham), and in response to the condition of man, sent the flood. The flood was rather an instrument of restoration of the original order of creation. So, the import of the flood was to save man from his unfavorable condition.

Many would always quote some passages in the New Testament to buttress the belief that the flood was a means of punishment (Matt. 24:38-39 and 2Pet. 2:5), but it is obvious that these passages do not teach such. For Instance in Matthew 24:38-39, the emphasis was not on the punishment by means of the flood but the unexpectedness and suddenness of the flood. Matthew used that to liken to the nature of the second coming of the son of man (rapture, and not parousia). In 2Peter 2:5, we see the second example used by Peter to buttress his point on the destruction of false teachers (2:1-3). Peter said that their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and that their destruction has not been sleeping, as many would think. To buttress his pointed, Peter cited some historical examples (4-10) to show that God must bring about their condemnation, but in due time. In the periscope of this warning, Peter kept mentioning that a day of Judgment has been reserved for all. The flood must not be seen as punishment, but as God's merciful and kind response to the problem that befuddled man.

6. Conclusion

Germane to the understanding of the import of the flood is nacham, a key word in the expression "it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth". The linguistic understanding of the word reveals that the flood was sent for a positive reason, and not for a negative one - to save man from his deteriorated unfavorable condition. Understanding nacham as it is presented in the English translations is misleading, and could hide the proper understanding of the import of the flood and the actual purpose of the flood which was to restore the original order of creation. So, the flood was not a punishment but an instrument of restoration of the order of creation.

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