

Between Poetic Justice and Poetic Mercy: God in the Flood Narrative (Genesis 6–7)

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“FOR I, THE LORD, do not change [*kî ’ānî Yhwh lô’ šānîti*].”¹ Throughout the centuries, the five words of God’s oracle in Malachi 3:6 have played a prominent role, as a *locus theologicus*, in the debate about God’s immutability.² God’s words in the next verse, however, could provide a fulcrum for the converse doctrine of God’s mutability, since the divine speaker now enjoins the people of Israel: “Return to me, and I will return to you [*šûbû ’ēlay wə’āšûbā ’ālêkem*]” (v. 7). God’s return represents, if anything, a reversal of the direction he had previously taken, and thus a move of freedom in the Godhead. The tension these two verses encapsulates also finds narrative embodiment in the Hebrew Bible. Taking the Flood narrative (Gen 6–9) as proof text, I will show that God’s “repentance”—expressed in most cases by the triliteral verbal root *n-ḥ-m*—paradoxically represents the linchpin of God’s character. Amid a subtle interplay of suspense, curiosity, and surprise, the narrative sets God’s dramatic changes against a background of human changes. Yet, in so doing, the Bible pays extreme attention to the divine difference. Far from being lost in human consequentiality, God is God, more than ever, in his way of changing. Responding to human ethical inconstancy, God vindicates, from reversal to reversal, a paradoxical faithfulness to himself and to his overall design for creation and humankind.

¹ All translations are based in the NRSV, which I sometimes adapt for my purposes.

² The first proof text to which Thomas Aquinas appeals in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 9, a. 1, in favor of God’s immutability is Mal 3:6 (cf. *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 14); see also Hilaire de Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 7.27, and John Cassian, *Collationes* 6.14.

God as *Dramatis Persona*

The present inquiry requires a preliminary intellectual conversion: it calls for a *conversio ad dramatis personam*. “The Bible,” Erri de Luca writes, “is at least literature, and the God of Israel is, to say the least, the greatest literary character of all time.”³ Whoever wants to develop a theological and critical discourse about God in the Bible’s founding narratives has primarily to deal with him as a narrative character. God, it can be objected from a religious perspective, is much more than a literary character, yet it is *as a literary character* that, in the narrative corpus of Scripture, he acts and reacts, speaks and listens, feels and decides. A tenet of Jewish traditional interpretation states that “no Scripture gets out of its literal meaning [‘*yn mqr’ yws’ mydy pšwtw*].”⁴ The literal, or better, contextual meaning (since the word *pšt* connotes a form of extension and thus of inscription in the flow of narration) is the home of all further elaboration, be it midrashic, theological, or spiritual. What is true for “Scripture” is true for Scripture’s main protagonist, the divine *persona*. Whatever the theological elaboration, the deity of biblical faith is never other than the biblical character who acts—“God said,” “God saw,” “God repented.”

To approach God as a *dramatis persona* is to take the measure of the limitations that affect such a *persona*. The drama is represented through the vehicle of language, and the limits of human language—conventional by necessity, by force sequential—thoroughly pervade the representation in question. Moreover, the particular limitations of biblical Hebrew compound the general limitations of language: its articulation of time and space, its way of contrasting or mixing genders, the declination of time and aspect in its verbal system, and so on. These limitations could threaten the representation of God as transcendent and presumably unbound to any human system of signs. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aphorism that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” has a special relevance when it comes to the character whose “greatness no one can fathom” (Ps 145:3).⁵

Another aspect of literariness, however, makes up for such limitations: the dramatic resources of narrative representation. When it comes to the

³ Erri De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991), 9 (my translation).

⁴ The rule is mentioned three times in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Šabb. 63a; b. Yebam. 11b, 24a), yet it gained full relevance in the exegetical project of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki; 1040–1105), which was continued by the school of the *Pashtanim*, the masters of the *peshaṭ*.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 149 (5.6; my translation).

characterization of God, none of the resources in question is ignored; all of them are brought into play. Suspense, curiosity, and surprise—the three universals of narrativity⁶—join forces in a story marked at every turn by reversals and recognitions, monologues and dialogues, gaps and repetitions. Because of his uniqueness as a “character,” God actually “begs” for dramatic narrative, and dramatic narrative at its best. As Meir Sternberg points out, “most dimensions associated with character—physical appearance, social status, personal history, local habitation—do not apply to him at all.”⁷ God radically differs from any other character in the biblical word, and this radical difference necessitates a subtler art of narration, one able to convey dramatically God’s paradoxical features, “not in orderly form at the start but piecemeal and in their dramatic manifestations.”⁸ In this process, the pressure exercised by God’s character brings narrative to its very limits. So it is in the Flood narrative, which presents a stunning dramatization of God’s attributes in the context of the moral depravation of early humanity.

The Flood Narrative and God’s Attributes

One of the functions of the Flood story in the overall pentateuchal narrative is to herald God’s way in his dealings with humankind: a double way, actually, swinging between justice and mercy. Confronted with the

⁶ The model of the three universals has been formulated by Meir Sternberg in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); the incidence of the universals in question in the Bible is set out in Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 264–320. The following summary of Sternberg’s theory is worth quoting in full: “Suspense arises from rival scenarios about the future: from the discrepancy between what the telling lets us readers know about the happening (e.g., a conflict) at any moment and what still lies ahead, ambiguous because yet unresolved in the world. Its fellow universals rather involve manipulations of the past, which the tale communicates in a sequence discontinuous with the happening. Perceptibly so, for curiosity: knowing that we do not know, we go forward with our mind on the gapped antecedents, trying to infer (bridge, compose) them in retrospect. For surprise, however, the narrative first unobtrusively gaps or twists its chronology, then unexpectedly discloses to us our misreading and forces a corrective rereading in late re-cognition. The three accordingly cover among them the workings that distinguish narrative from everything else, because they exhaust the possibilities of communicating action: of aligning its natural early-to-late development with its openness to untimely, crooked disclosure” (Sternberg, “How Narrativity Makes a Difference,” *Narrative* 9, no. 2 [2001]: 115–22, at 117).

⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 323.

⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 323.

evil created by humankind, God, in his justice, sentences his creation to destruction (Gen 6:7). Yet the same God, in his merciful grace, singles out Noah to establish an everlasting covenant with him for the sake of the created world (Gen 6:18; 8:21; 9:9–11).

This double perspective efficiently anticipates what will be revealed at Sinai: in his innermost identity, God unites two dispositions: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the parents on the children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:5–6). These attributes reveal the nucleus of God’s portrait. In the text, one comes before the other because so is the law of language, perforce sequential. Yet in a portrait (in any portrait), the subject’s features are meant to coexist, rather than to succeed each other. Is this the case when it comes to the biblical God? It is, of course, always possible to construe such a succession as purposeful and to suppose, for instance, that it signals a hierarchy in God’s attributes, with his justice always coming before his other attributes. A further revelation of God’s attributes, however, belies such an interpretation. In Exodus 34:6–7, after Moses’s intercession in the episode of the golden calf, God reformulates his attributes, giving pride of place to mercy, which is further emphasized:

The Lord, the Lord, a god merciful and gracious [*Yhwh ’el raḥûm wəḥannûn*], slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.

Against the background of God’s self-revelation in Exodus 20, it becomes clear that God’s freedom lies in his way of ordering and reordering his attributes.⁹ He does so in the context of Moses’s intercession, and so, presumably, he is free to do at any given point of the story (see chart 1).

⁹ The phenomenon is pointed out by Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 737–38; see also Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “Justice et miséricorde: Les attributs divins dans la dynamique narrative du Pentateuque,” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 138, no. 1 (2016): 3–22.

Chart 1 (reversal between A and B)

Exodus 20:5–6	Exodus 34:6–7
A For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the sons, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, B but showing steadfast love [<i>hesed</i>] to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.	B The Lord, the Lord, a god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [<i>hesed</i>] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [<i>hesed</i>] for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, A yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and the sons of sons, to the third and the fourth generation.

This revelation of divine attributes ushers in correlative divine actions: it is God's prerogative to switch from one attribute to the other, in reaction to human choices in history and according to his secret wisdom. God will punish (and educate) now and will forgive later, or the other way around, he will exonerate now and will castigate later. A verb is attached to this divine shifting, the verb *n-h-m* in the *niphal* stem/*binyan*, which means "to change one's mind, to repent." Not, of course, that God would have to repent from an evil committed. Rather, God constantly readjusts, resetting his behavior to humankind, to his people, or to individuals, switching from justice to compassion and from compassion to justice in successive reversals (and according to various tropes).¹⁰ As Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman point out, "divine repentance can move in either of two directions: from judgment to clemency or the other way around. It can also move in both directions sequentially."¹¹ The prophetic variations are

¹⁰ See Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991), 285. See also Hans Walter Wolff's paraphrase of the meaning of *n-h-m* in the *niphal* stem, "to repent": "A change of mind prompted by the emotions, a turning away from an earlier decision on the part of someone deeply moved" (*Joel and Amos* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 298). See Exod 32:12 and Jonah 3:9, where the verb *n-h-m*, "to repent," is associated with *š-w-b*, "revert."

¹¹ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 659. For instance, God retracts from punishment in Jer 18:7–8, while he retracts from blessing, the other way around, in Jer 18:9–10.

countless, ranging from one extreme (“I will not repent,” announces God in Jer 4:28 and Ezek 24:14) to the other, the repentance against all odds: “‘As I purposed to do evil to you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘and I did not relent, so again have I purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah’” (Zech 8:14–15). No less than its prophetic speech, the Bible’s narrative episodes feature variegated divine reversals at key junctures in its macro-plot.¹² Repentance, in the sense of *n-h-m*, lies at the core of God’s sovereign self and is the dramatic pivot between his justice and his mercy.¹³

God’s Double Answer to the Crisis of the Creation

The Flood narrative opens with a major scene of such repentance. The opening “The Lord saw . . .” (Gen 6:5) echoes the refrain of Genesis 1: “God saw that it was good.” Yet what God sees is no longer the goodness of creation, but the pervasive (human) wickedness on the earth. The distressing spectacle triggers God’s initial repentance. The narrator first reports the divine change (“And the Lord repented [*wayyinnāhem*] that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” [Gen 6:6]), before giving access to God’s (antecedent) inner monologue: “I repent [*nihamti*] that I have made them” (v. 7). God’s rethinking is radical and reveals God’s radical aversion to evil.¹⁴ An orientation to good accompanied God’s creation, but it remained unfulfilled. God’s inner reversal emphasizes his ethical character: the divine being is a fulcrum of moral consciousness and the present *peripeteia* reveals the issue at stake in the overall biblical drama.

The radical corruption of the earth calls for a radical treatment that, in biblical fashion, replicates the human behavior:

¹² See Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “God’s Repentance and ‘False Starts’ in Biblical History (Genesis 6–9; Exodus 32–34; 1 Samuel 15 and 2 Samuel 7),” in *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007*, ed. A. Lemaire (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 469–94.

¹³ Referring to “the articulation of the character of Yahweh in Ex. 34:6–7,” Walter Brueggemann points to “a profound disjunction at the core of the Subject’s life” (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* [Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1997], 268–69). To my view, the “disjunction” in question is better approached in the phenomenon (and the term) of God’s *n-h-m* repentance.

¹⁴ Compare this to the Akkadian epic Atrahasis, in which the cause of the flood is a case of disturbing the peace at night. At the opening of the story, the great gods complain: “Oppressive has become the clamor of mankind. By their uproar they prevent sleep” (Old Babylonian Version, II, 7–8, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969], 104).

Chart 2

Verse 11: The earth was corrupt in God's sight [*š-h-t* in the *niphal* stem].
 Verse 12: God saw that the earth was corrupt [*š-h-t* in the *niphal* stem].
 Verse 12: for all flesh had corrupted its way [*š-h-t* in the *hiphil* stem].
 Verse 13: I am going to destroy them [*š-h-t* in the *hiphil* stem].

As Bill Arnold aptly points out, the recurrence of the root *š-h-t*, “to corrupt,” plays within a logic of poetic justice:

In a way difficult to express in English, the use of this Hebrew verb illustrates that God's actions are both unavoidable and just. Humanity has corrupted itself and therefore God declares humanity corrupt (i.e., “destroyed”). The Old Testament often uses such word plays to illustrate a sort of ‘poetic justice,’ meaning the penalty inflicted matches repayment in kind for the harm done, or a sort of commensurate form of justice. God's actions are measured and just, never reckless or unmerited, and God's punishment does not go beyond the ability of God's grace to restore.¹⁵

What the repetition of the root *š-h-t* makes clear is that God, in his justice, has entered human consequentiality. God's reaction to humanity's universally appalling behavior stands out as a *post hoc* response, in terms of both chronology and causality. The phenomenon, however, raises a question of theodicy: could God be caught in the strict logic of consequentiality, his actions determined by the human behaviors to which they are a response? Actually a counter-momentum accompanies God's straightforward resolution of justice. In verse 8, the narrator adds: “But Noah had found grace in the eyes of the Lord [*wənōaḥ māšā' ḥēn bə'ēnē Yhwh*].” A movement of grace thus accompanies God's calibrated justice. The temporal relation of the two moves, however, calls for closer attention.

¹⁵ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99. See also: Murray H. Lichtenstein, “The Poetry of Poetic Justice: A Comparative Study in Biblical Imagery,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 5 (1973): 255–65; John L. Barton, “Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 30, no. 1 (1979): 1–14. On the general issue of poetic justice, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). See in particular Meir Sternberg, “Universals of Narrative and Their Cognitive Fortunes (II),” *Poetics Today* 24, no. 3 (2003): 517–638, at 621, who considers the ins and outs of poetic justice and poetic art in Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible.

The syntactic construction *wənōaḥ māšā' hēn* is a typical *we-x-qatal* interrupting a previous concatenation of actions expressed in *wayyiqtol*. In such a context, the *we-x-qatal* construction usually expresses a contrast, simultaneity, or in many cases, anteriority in the past.¹⁶ Translations and commentaries usually construe the construction as a contrast: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” The narrative dynamic of the passage, however, suggests more than a simple contradistinction. Up to this point in chapter 6, the references to human persons, in the discourse of the narrator (vv. 5–6) as well as in God’s discourse (v. 7), have been general: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind [*ḥā’ādām*] was great in the earth” (v. 5); “And the Lord repented that he had made humankind [*ḥā’ādām*] on the earth” (v. 6); “I will wipe humankind [*ḥā’ādām*], whom I have created, from the face of the earth—from humankind [*mē’ādām*] to animals” (v. 7). What verse 8 signals is thus that a *single* man, Noah, has been made the exception. Such a twist is characteristic of narrative surprise, which unexpectedly exposes to the reader an *already* present contingency that has eluded him—by reason of an artful gapping by the narrator. The dynamic of surprise thus suggests associating contrast with anteriority in the past: “But Noah *had found* grace in the eyes of the Lord.”¹⁷ In verse 8 we suddenly realize that God, who has decided to wipe

¹⁶ See particularly: Alviero Niccacci, *Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 86 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 188; Ziony Zevit, *The Anterior Construction in Classical Hebrew*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 50 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

¹⁷ The translation in question is adopted in several versions, such the Jerusalem Bible (1986), the New English Bible (1970), the Revised English Bible (1989), and the *Zürcher Bible* (2007); it is also opted for in the commentaries by John A. Skinner, *Genesis: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 2nd ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969 [originally 1910]), 151, and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 388. See also: *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. Arthur Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), no. 142b; Zevit, *Anterior Construction*, 16–17; Françoise Mirguet, *La Représentation du divin dans les récits du Pentateuque: Méditations syntaxiques et narratives*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 75–76. For a survey of the past anterior constructions in the Hebrew Bible using *we-x-qatal*, see Zevit, *Anterior Construction*, 15–32. Among the listed occurrences, the following cases are worth mentioning (the narrator is speaking, with God as subject): Gen 1:5; 6:7–8; 13:14; 19:24; 21:1; 24:1; Exod 9:23; 10:13; 1 Sam 1:5; 9:15; 2 Kgs 20:4. Two significant cases are to be added: 1 Sam 15:35 (with *n-h-m*) and 2 Sam 17:14 (“For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring ruin on Absalom”). See also the case of anteriority in the past in Gen 20:18 (expressed with a *qatal*) construed as a narrative

out perverted humankind, has also singled out a man, Noah, and adopted him as the man of his favor.¹⁸ Punishment, we realize, is neither the first nor the last word in God's design; it is *already* accompanied by a movement of grace. The narrator reports afterwards a factor—the judgment of grace on Noah—that occurs in concert with the told action. What the narrator makes perceptible here is the wisdom of the divine character, a wisdom capable of artfully holding together two answers to the crisis that affects creation.

Noah Paronomasia

When Noah enters the stage at the end of Genesis 5, his name is immediately involved in a trope that will extend through the four chapters of the Flood narrative, the trope of paronomasia.¹⁹ In three short verses (vv.

surprise in Sternberg, *Poetics*, 315–16. Commenting on Gen 6:8, Mirguet explains that the *we-x-qatal* structure points to “a new element in the background of the narration, susceptible to signal a change in the course of action, or even an anteriority, this is to say, a slightly anterior event, throwing a new light on what precedes” (*Représentation du divin*, 75; translation mine).

¹⁸ What comes before and after the revelation of Gen 6:8 points to Noah's past and present: his election does not derive from future meritorious acts. In 5:32, Noah's life is already well engaged: “After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.” Noah's portrait in 6:9 describes him in what amounts to a proven behavior: “Noah was [*hāyāb*] a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.”

¹⁹ For the pervasiveness of paronomasia in the Hebrew Bible, see S. B. Noegel, “Paronomasia,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:26. The phenomenon is often associated with the Latin byword *nomen omen* (e.g., *nomen atque omen* in Plautus's *Persa*, 4.3): someone's name is a harbinger of his/her destiny (which, in the Hebrew Bible, does not mean his/her fate, given the biblical aversion to any form of determinism). “In cases of *nomen omen*, the paronomasia unlocks or reveals meanings that the biblical authors thought were embedded or incipient in the names being played upon” (Jonathan G. Kline, *Allusive Soundplay in the Hebrew Bible* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016], 16). On the characters' names, a wealth of material is present in Andrzej Strus, *Nomen-Omen: La stylistique sonore des noms propres dans le Pentateuque*, *Analecta Biblica* 80 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), and Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1986). See also: Yair Zakovitch, “Explicit and Implicit Name-Derivations,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 4 (1980): 167–81; Zakovitch, “A Study of Precise and Partial Derivations in Biblical Etymology,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15 (1980): 31–50; and Herbert Marks, “Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 1 (1995): 21–42. The early rabbis referred to the device as *lāšōn nōpēl* ‘al lāšōn (“language falling upon language”) (see Genesis Rabbah 18:6; 31:8). The inter-

28–30) we hear of his birth and of the name given to him by Lamek, his father, accompanied by an etymological couplet: “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall comfort/console us [*yanaḥmēnū*; the *piel* stem of *n-ḥ-m*] from our work and from the toil of our hands” (v. 29). Strangely enough, Lamek, in his etymological midrash, does not elaborate upon the root that actually lies behind or beneath the name of his son; the name *nōaḥ*, Noah, derives from the verbal root *n-w-ḥ*, meaning “to rest.” Instead, he makes use of another root, *n-ḥ-m*, here conjugated in the *piel* stem, which means “to console, to comfort.” “The verb [*n-ḥ-m*] (‘to console’ or ‘bring relief’),” Herbert Marks writes, “evokes the name Menahem, not Noah, for which one rather requires a form of the verb [*n-w-ḥ*] (‘to rest’)—the reading found in the Septuagint [*dianapausei*] (‘he will afford an interval of rest’).”²⁰ By preferring the divergent root *n-ḥ-m*, “to console,” Lamek, one can imagine, desires for himself some sort of immediate consolation—a type of wish emblematically fulfilled in the wine Noah will be the first to produce (see Gen 9:20–21). The surprise, however, is that God avails himself of the root *n-ḥ-m* introduced by Lamek and makes the most of it.

When God says, “I repent [*niḥamtī*] I have made them” (v. 7), he appropriates the root introduced by Lamek, conjugating it now in the *niphal* stem (as does the narrator in v. 6, mirroring God’s use in first person). Used by Lamek apropos of a certain comfort, the root *n-ḥ-m* is now associated by God with a dramatic personal reversal, a repentance, which is the prelude to a punishment. The divine rephrasing is an instance of a recurrent phenomenon in the biblical corpus: God works in history by working out previously uttered human words.²¹ The phenomenon is encapsulated in a biblical proverb: “To man belong the plans of the heart,

est for paronomasia has known a scholarly renewal in Ferdinand de Saussure’s research about the “anagrams” (1906–1909). The Swiss linguist intended to show that the Greek and Latin poets were composing from a given theme word, using its phonemes according to certain rules. On de Saussure, see: J. Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Pierre-Yves Testenoire, *Ferdinand de Saussure: à la recherche des anagrammes* (Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2013). In case of Noah’s name in Gen 6–9, see essentially Marks, “Biblical Naming,” 25–29, and secondarily: Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 9, 66, 158–62; Zakovitch, “Precise and Partial Derivations,” 38–41; Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 203–4.

²⁰ Marks, “Biblical Naming,” 25. About the Menahem (or Nahman) hypothesis, see Genesis Rabbah 25:2 and Zakovitch, “Precise and Partial Derivations,” 38.

²¹ For God’s strategies in his restating of human words, see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “Dieu sauve l’histoire comme en sous-main: La rhétorique des amendements divins,” in *Raconter Dieu: entre récit, histoire et théologie*, ed. Christian Dionne and Yvan Mathieu, *Le livre et le rouleau* 44 (Brussels: Lessius, 2014), 173–96.

but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue” (Prov 16:1), reformulated by Thomas à Kempis in his notorious maxim: “Homo proponit, sed Deus disponit.”²² The root introduced by Lamek in order to “coin” Noah’s role in history (providing some sort of consolation) is used by God to express his desolation and repentance, a repentance bringing about judgment and punishment. Yet, a close reading of the text reveals that God’s re-use of the root *n-ḥ-m*, which encapsulates Noah’s very name, *nōah*, is just the first step in the protracted paronomasia on Noah’s name that characterizes the Flood narrative.

As the medieval Jewish commentator Bekhor Shor (Orléans; twelfth century) noticed, the name Noah (*nōah*) is the palindrome of the word *ḥēn*, “grace.”²³ The word *ḥēn* consists of the two consonants of the name *nōah*, but reverses their sequence. The initial portrait of Noah (“But Noah had found grace in the eyes of [the Lord]”), W. Lee Humphreys writes, presents him as God’s “perfect other”:²⁴ he mirrors God’s grace. Thus in the narrated world Noah’s name and Noah’s person represent a token of God’s alternative logic, his logic of grace. Whereas a process of divine justice and punishment occupies the forefront of the story, Noah reflects, in his person and in his name, God’s alternative disposition of grace.

Moreover, as James C. Vanderkam has observed, the sequence that runs from verse 7 to verse 8 integrates a significant echoing:

Chart 3 (resonating letters *n*, *ḥ*, and *m* in bold)

Verse 7: I repent that I have made them.	<i>niḥamtī kī ‘āšītim</i>
Verse 8: But Noah had found grace.	<i>wānōaḥ māšā’ ḥēn</i>

After the divine utterance *niḥamtī kī ‘āšītim*, “I repent that I made them” (v. 7), the narrator’s statement *wānōaḥ māšā’ ḥēn*, “but Noah had found grace” (v. 8), contains in sequence the consonants of the verb *n-ḥ-m*.²⁵ It

²² Thomas à Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi* 1.19.2.

²³ Bekhor Shor contrasts the euphoric instance in Gen 6:8, associating *nōah*, “Noah,” and *ḥēn*, “grace,” and the dysphoric case in Gen 38:7: “But Er [‘ēr], Judah’s first-born, was wicked [ra’] in the sight of Yhwh.” See also Marks, “Biblical Naming,” 26. For a survey of analogous cases, see: Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 88–93; Noegel, “Paronomasia,” 26 (under the heading “Anagramic Paronomasia”).

²⁴ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001), 68.

²⁵ See James C. Vanderkam, *From Revelation to Canon: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 62 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 403.

is as if another, surprising, “repentance” (of grace, this time) was looming in the name (and the person) of Noah. The signal is subtle—a kind of filigree—but it reveals to what lengths biblical narrative can go to reveal the intricacies of God’s design.²⁶ When God acts in history, a plot of grace can run alongside a plot of judgment. God can enact his mercy (in a repentance of mercy) precisely when he enacts his justice (in a repentance of justice). By combining narrative surprise (“Noah had found grace”) and astute reverberations of the key words *hēn*, “grace,” and *n-h-m*, “to repent,” the narrative reveals not only that God coordinates apparently opposite designs, but also that he begets a temporality of his own, combining antecedency and teleology. The anteriority in the past—the election of Noah—prepares the *telos* of the entire story, the covenant promised in 6:18, before Noah’s entry into the ark and before the Flood: “But I will establish my covenant with you.” The reader thus realizes that the God who changed his mind in front of the corrupted creation *already* had in mind (in Noah’s election and in the promise he makes to Noah) another purpose: a covenant of grace. The making of the covenant, however, will not happen without a dramatic turn in God’s *dramatis persona*: a repentance of repentance.

Repentance of Repentance

At the climax of the water rise, we learn that “God remembered Noah” (Gen 8:1). “God remembering Noah,” Joseph Blenkinsopp writes, “is not the reaction of an absent-minded God who suddenly recalls what he had done”; it is rather an expression of his providential care.²⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, God’s remembering of someone indeed expresses his timely “keeping in mind” of one of his human partners at moment of crisis, for whose sake he is about to act.²⁸ God’s faithful remembering of Noah—a further expression of his initial “grace” in his regard—will prompt an act of faithfulness by Noah once the waters have receded. When Noah leaves the ark, his first reflex is to offer

²⁶ The Biblical text multiplies anagrammatic “figures in the carpet” enhancing the power and pervasiveness of verbs and names. To give but one example: in Gen 15:1, God’s promise to Abraham—“Abram, . . . your reward shall be very great”—tightly associates the patriarch’s name with the overabundance of the reward in question; the three phonemes *bēt* [b], *rēš* (r), and *mēm* (m) appearing in that order in the name “Abram” (‘*abrām*’) are echoed in the sequence of *rēš-bēt-mēm* distributed over the two words “very great,” *harbēh mē ’ōd* (cf. v. 13). See Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 96.

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 142.

²⁸ See in particular: Gen 19:29 (God remembers Abraham); 30:22 (Rachel); Exod 2:24 (Israel); 1 Sam 1:1,19 (Hannah).

holocausts to his God: “Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen 8:20).²⁹ The initiative of the sacrifice emanates from Noah, but the offering immediately pleases God. Noah has actually perceived the reason for the presence in the ark of extra clean animals: they were meant for sacrificial offering. The effect the holocausts produce on God is remarkable. It returns us to the theme of God’s repentance and reveals (by reactivating the running paronomasia) how Noah’s acting is interior to God’s own.

An analogy first requires attention. Noah’s sacrifice in chapter 8 triggers a divine interior monologue, the second in the narrative. The first monologue took place in chapter 6, when God saw the human wickedness on the earth: “And the Lord saw [*wayyar*] [wickedness on the earth] . . . and it grieved him to his heart” (vv. 5–6). This was a monologue of disappointment, ending in a repentance (of justice and punishment): “I repent that I have made them.” The second monologue, in chapter 8, is triggered by what God smells: “The Lord smelled [*wayyārah*],” and what he smells prompts a new soliloquy: “And when the Lord smelled the odor of appeasement, the Lord said in his heart, ‘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 other words, God, in his second monologue, repents of what he had decided in his first.

Chart 4

Genesis 6:5–6	Genesis 8:21
The Lord saw [<i>wayyar</i>], . . . and it grieved him to his heart → interior monologue → repentance	The Lord smelled [<i>wayyārah</i>] the odor of appeasement, the Lord said in his heart → interior monologue → repentance of repentance

²⁹ In Jean Louis Ska’s genetic hypothesis about the Flood narrative, the scene of Noah’s sacrifice belongs to a series of post-P supplements whose first function was “to justify the function of worship in Israel by giving it a foundation in the history of the universe. It is the sacrifice of Noah, the just one, that brought about a change of attitude on God’s part (8:21–22) and thus made the survival of the universe secure. It may be thought that Israel’s worship was to play a similar role in the life of the people” (*The Exegesis of the Pentateuch*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 20).

The overall plotline of the Flood narrative thus culminates in a repentance of repentance: a dramatic climax. “The wheel is come full circle,” as Shakespeare has Edmund put it in *King Lear* (5.3.175), but in an auspicious, readjusted, and everlasting perspective. God’s global measure of grace is all the more surprising because of the motivation behind it: the fact that humankind is prone to evil—“I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (8:21). The human heart is prone to evil exactly, the reader will remember, as it was before the Flood: “Every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (6:5).

Chart 5

Genesis 6:5	Genesis 8:21
Every inclination [yēšer] of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil [raʿ] continually.	For the inclination [yēšer] of the human heart is evil [raʿ] from youth.

In other words, mankind has not changed; it is rather God who changes in his relation to them. Whereas a single, unilateral, orientation characterizes the human heart, before and after the Flood, God’s heart demonstrates a stunning reversibility between his justice and his grace. The God who decided in chapter 6 to punish humanity for its sweeping wickedness has now decided, at the end of chap. 8, to preserve his creation, granting grace to humans still inclined to evil.³⁰ God’s distinctive feature thus lies in his freedom to change, in stunning contrast with the unchanging human tendency to evil. What emerges from the overall picture, therefore, is God’s desire to deal with humankind in its historical defective concreteness, a dramatic turn that is both realistic and benevolent.³¹

Noah’s Mediation

The dramatic scene of God’s reversal in chapter 8, however, calls for a closer reading. As already stated, God’s monologue and gracious initiative have been prompted by Noah’s sacrifice, and more precisely by what God smelled on this occasion (v. 21):

³⁰ As Gerhard von Rad points out, “the same condition which in the prologue is the basis for God’s judgment in the epilogue reveals God’s grace and providence” (*Genesis: A Commentary* [London: SCM Press, 1961], 119).
³¹ See Sonnet, “God’s Repentance and ‘False Starts.’”

And the LORD smelled the odor of appeasement [*wayyārah Yhwh 'et-rēah hannîhōah*].

In the book of Leviticus, the expression “an odor of appeasement” functions as a refrain associated with divine contentment in the sacrifices (starting with the holocaust in Lev 1:9,13,17). The scene in Genesis 6–9 takes place before the revelation of the sacrifices meant for the cult of Israel, and the phrase “odor of appeasement [*rēah hannîhōah*]” here draws its pertinence from a process of echoing in the macro-text. The word *nîhōah*, “appeasement,” derives from the root *n-w-h*, which stands behind the name of Noah.³² In a subtle way, the word *nîhōah* echoes the consonants and the vowels of *nōah*.³³ This name, as we have seen in 6:8, mirrors God’s “grace” (*hēn*). In chapter 8, the word *hēn*, “grace,” compounds again with Noah’s name in the word *nîhōah*, “appeasement”—and this in the scene of God’s repentance of grace. When Noah freely and liberally offers a sacrifice of pleasing odor, he corresponds to the grace that pervades him; he enacts the grace that informs his name and his character, and this pleases God.³⁴ The surprise, therefore, is that God’s repentance of grace turns out to be such an act of synergy. Noah is acting as God’s second self, and God finds in Noah’s offering the prompt for his sovereign move. The scene actually creates a precedent, providing the pattern of prophetic intercession and of God’s willing self-exposure to such intercession.³⁵

³² The root *n-w-h*, “to rest,” dismissed in Lamek’s initial etymology, thus makes a comeback in Noah’s story. As Marks aptly observes, “the withheld meaning ‘rest’ returns with the gradual recession or ‘return’ [*š-w-b*] of the flood waters . . . when the ark ‘comes to rest’ [*wattānah*] on the mountains (8:4), and the dove ‘returns’ having found no ‘rest-place’ [*mānōah*] for her foot (8:9; cf. 8:7, 12). Finally, the ‘soothing aroma’ of the sacrifice [*rēah hannîhōah*] (8:21), which marks the end of the flood amid language richly reminiscent of the prologue, reconfigures Noah’s name” (“Biblical Naming,” 26).

³³ For the congruence between *nîhōah* and *nōah*, see already the midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 25:2. See also: von Rad, *Genesis*, 122; Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 162; Marks, “Biblical Naming,” 26.

³⁴ To say it with Gerard Manley Hopkins, he “keeps grace. . . . He acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is” (“As the Kingfisher Catches Fire”).

³⁵ For God’s exposure to intercession, see in particular Amos 3:7: “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.” See also Exod 32:10, in God’s injunction to Moses: “And now leave me be [*hannîhāh lî*], that my wrath may flare against them.” The imperative “leave me” brings into play the root involved in Noah’s name, *nōah*, and may be understood as a kind of test of Moses, reminding him of his responsibility in intercession (as occurs in the next verse). “Scholars, both Jewish and Christian,” Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer writes, “have long suspected that the deeper message of the passage is not to ban interces-

What the perfume of the holocaust triggers is an impressive measure of grace: "And when the Lord smelled the odor of appeasement, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, . . . nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done'" (v. 21). God's repentance, in favor of humankind and creation, is a dramatic scene, a reversal in the narrative. Yet, for a careful reader or, more probably perhaps, for a careful re-reader, the reversal in question is not an outright surprise: it is also, as I have indicated, a motif discreetly announced, as by a watermark, in the phrase of Genesis 6:8: "But Noah had found grace in God's eyes." The phrase includes a filigree, the root *n-h-m*, the verb attached to God's most inner reversals, and it does so in a context of grace. In other words, God's graceful repentance in chapter 8 is not only a final turn in the story; it has been looming on the horizon of the story since its very beginning. In the end, thus, as Marks puts it, the name of Noah indeed implies "consolation" and "comfort." Yet, it arrives at this meaning in another realm and through another process than what Lamek presumably expects: Noah's consolation had to encompass the Lord's own desolation in order to achieve its full relevance.³⁶

Conclusion

Reversals affect the story of the Flood at all its constitutive levels, conferring further intensity on the narrative sequence. The drama pivots on a major change of direction, from a plan of de-creation (with its detailed instructions) to a plan of re-creation, with updated provisions. The linchpin of the reversal is located in the Godhead—God is the one who repents, opting first for watery destruction, but in the end, changing his mind: never again such a destruction. The turnabouts in the story intersect with axiological reversals: what God sees in Genesis 6 is no longer the goodness of his creation but the evil created by the first humanity. God repents, yet he will himself shift from a move of justice (in front of men and women inclined to evil) to a move of grace (in front of the same, still inclined to evil). A third level of reversal is more discreet, noticeable in the texture of the narrative, in the sequence of its letters. This level is paradigmatically illustrated in the inversion of the consonants *n* and *h* (from *nḥ* to *hn*) in the syntagm in 6:8: "and Noah had

sion but to encourage it. In requesting to be left alone, God is in fact wishing the very opposite. In other words, by declaring his desire to destroy Israel, God gives Moses a reason to intercede, and by the words 'leave me alone' informs Moses that he had the power to hinder God from executing his threats" ("God's Hidden Compassion," *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no. 2 [2006]: 191–213, at 195).

³⁶ See Marks, "Biblical Naming," 27.

found grace to the eyes of the Lord [*wəṇōaḥ māšā' hēn bə'éné Yhwh*].” In this case, however, the reversal does not play within a dramatic *peripeteia*, but in a process of mirroring. God’s grace, the sentence reveals, is mirrored in Noah’s name and person. The micro-process actually functions as a *mise en abyme* of a phenomenon that pervades the Flood narrative and endows it with a specific dimension. On this phenomenon my conclusion will briefly dwell.

Sequentiality is the backbone of narration, and the story of the Flood makes the most of it. It exhibits a sustained temporal and causal scansion, marked off by God’s initial reaction and his instructions to Noah, the sequence of days, the swelling and the receding of the waters, the successive releases of the dove—all leading up to Noah’s sacrifice and the final scene of divine repentance and covenantal commitment. Such a sequence has a definite theological import since it conveys how deeply God enters human temporality and consequentiality. When God at the beginning of the story takes note of the pervasiveness of human wickedness (“God saw that . . .”), he is considering accomplished acts. The God of the Flood narrative is a God who has entered human moral consequentiality and is the God who reacts. His justice is a poetic justice, which enhances the *post hoc, propter hoc* of divine retribution.

Yet, the same narrative takes pains to demonstrate that God is far from being lost in consequentiality. God’s action, although sequential, is much more than sequential. His design is associated with a temporality *sui generis*, in which a process of grace is synchronized with a process of judgment, where antecedency (the election of Noah) auspiciously meets teleology (the covenant of grace promised to Noah and his sons, that is, to future humanity). In this process, God’s grace (*hēn*) is mirrored in the name and in the acts of a man, Noah (*nōaḥ*), and God’s dramatic and final repentance echoes a motif present from the start, inscribed as a filigree in the narrator’s statement about Noah in 6:8 (“But Noah had found grace in the eyes of the Lord,” with the root *n-ḥ-m* inscribed in the sentence). If God enters human consequentiality, he nonetheless transcends it altogether, as the one who overlaps the *post hoc, propter hoc* process in his all-comprehensive design, reflected in Noah’s person—in a stupendous instance of dual causality.³⁷ The narrator is God’s first ally

³⁷ About the way biblical narrative excels at alternating or intertwining divine and human causality, see: Yairah Amit, “The Dual Causality Principle and Its Effects on Biblical Literature,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37, no. 4 (1987): 385–400; Amit, “Dual Causality: An Additional,” in *Praise of Editing in the Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays in Retrospect*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 39 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 105–21.

in this intimation, who creates through the repetition of Noah's name (*nōah*) and its correlates in the narrative: "to repent" (*n-h-m*), "grace" (*hēn*), and "pleasing odor" (*rēah hannîhōah*) are a *basso continuo* throughout the Flood narrative, voicing God's alternative and persisting logic of grace. The successive elaborations on the nucleus (or the matrix) *hēn*, "grace," are certainly engaged in the narrative sequence, yet they also create a sense of pervasiveness. The story may go forward—it actually has to go forward—but these sounds continue to reverberate in the reader's memory. Like the perfume of Noah's sacrifice, the sound variations on the nucleus *hēn*, "grace," have a powerful and subtle communicative effect: they instill in the reader's mind a sense of the pervasiveness of God's grace in the story he is reading.³⁸ The reader is driven to keep this echo of grace in mind in the midst of the process of God's justice and punishment, just as God remembered Noah in the midst of the Flood (8:1). If the Flood narrative is a powerful instance of poetic justice, it is also an effective case of poetic mercy. The achievement of Genesis 6–9 is to have kept both poetics interwoven in the same plot as a witness to God's faithfulness to himself. In the crisis of the Flood, God reveals himself as a God of interrelated mercy and justice, exactly as he does in his revelation at Sinai. From this dynamic identity, able to embrace all the contingencies of human history, the biblical God never departs—"For I, the Lord, do not change" (Mal 3:6).³⁹ N.V

³⁸ See Gary A. Anderson's apt comment: "Representation and impassibility in their Old Testament inflections take seriously God's intimate emotional involvement with humankind. Yet however passionate the divine/human encounters may appear, they never call into question the benevolent ends toward which God is driving the story" (*Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament. Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017], 38).

³⁹ Karl Barth's sharp-witted words in his *Church Dogmatics* are worth quoting at this point: "The immutable is the fact that this God is as the One He is, gracious and holy, merciful and righteous, patient and wise. The immutable is the fact that He is the Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer and Lord. This immutability includes rather than excludes life. In a word it is life. It does not, therefore, need to acquire life from the impulse of the created world, or above all from the emotions of our pious feelings. It not only has nothing whatever to do with the pagan idea of the *immobile*, which is only a euphemistic description of death, but it is its direct opposite. . . . God's constancy—which is a better word than the suspiciously negative word 'immutability'—is the constancy of His knowing, willing and acting and therefore of His person. It is the continuity, undivertability and indefatigableness in which God both is Himself and also performs His work, maintaining it as such and continually making it His work. It is the self-assurance in which God moves in Himself and in all His works and in which He is rich in Himself and in all His works without either losing Himself or (for fear of this loss) having to petrify in

Himself and renounce His movement and His riches. The constancy of God is not then the limit and boundary, the death of His life. For this very reason the right understanding of God's constancy must not be limited to His presence with creation, as if God in Himself were after all naked 'immutability' and therefore in the last analysis death. On the contrary it is in and by virtue of His constancy that God is alive in Himself and in all His works" (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/1, *The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000], 495).