



July 22, 2024

Reading the Signs

As I wrote this, the remnants of Hurricane Ian were splattering on the skylight over my head in Virginia, but an update to last week's Hurricane Beryl will do just as well. I was reading "A History of the World in 100 Objects," a dazzling tour published by the British Museum in 2011. Object 16 in the series is a Mesopotamian clay tablet telling the story of The Flood. When this was first translated, in 1872, it caused a crisis because it predated any known version of Genesis. So, did that buttress (an outside witness!) or demean (an older source!) the Genesis account?

In the "100 Objects" book, Britain's chief rabbi explains that in older Flood stories, the forces of nature are wielded by vengeful deities who war amongst themselves, and dislike the very humans who worship their power. But in the Bible, the One God, the Creator, insists that power must be just and compassionate, and we are introduced to "a world in which the whole universe is the result of single rational creative will."

Once you're not dealing with squabbling, capricious gods and random forces, but with a consistent and even compassionate God, the world looks very different. I like to think of Noah as a man who lived near the Bosphorus and, with his mind trained to look for rational cues in a rational world created and maintained by a rational God, noticed that the gigantic natural dam at the straits was starting to strain. He had the imagination to foresee what would happen when it gave way. God spoke to that imagination, giving him ideas how to prepare to survive...

His polytheistic neighbors laughed at him. Build a boat! On dry land as far as the eye can see! What an alarmist! What a doomscroller! Things are going to be just fine the way they always have been! And then came the water.

Climate scientists are in a way our modern prophets. Like Noah, they have observed a rational universe that follows laws, and they're seeing some big cracks in our defenses. To a great extent, they're being ignored, or even attacked, by individuals and by governments, and especially by fossil fuel corporations. We keep burning the fuel, the atmosphere heats up, the glaciers melt, the oceans warm and acidify. Despite oceans rising everywhere, we keep building beach houses on sand; despite epic droughts, we keep expanding the cities we've built in deserts.

The Dutch, who have an 800-year head start on us when it comes to managing water, shook their heads at us after Hurricane Sandy, saying, "Let me get this straight: you built wooden houses on sand spits with no coastal defenses in a place that has hurricanes. What did you think was going to happen?" Whose approach worked, Noah's or his neighbors?

~Faith Matters Written by Ruth Griffioen

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