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The Flood as Male Myth of Creation

ALAN DUNDES

Questions of meaning are often eschewed in myth scholarship. A large number of the essays treating the flood myth consist of retellings of diverse versions of the narrative. A good many merely relish the results of previous treatises, with little or no effort to interpret the possible significance of flood myth texts. Frazer, for example, after citing two hundred and fifty pages of flood myths, concludes: "On the whole, then, there seems to be good reason for thinking that some and probably many diluvial traditions are merely exaggerated reports of floods which actually occurred, whether as the result of heavy rain, earthquake-waves, or other causes. All such traditions, therefore, are partly legendary and partly mythical: so far as they preserve reminiscences of floods which really happened, they are legendary; so far as they describe universal deluges which never happened, they are mythical." The critical question is, or ought to be, why are flood myths told at all? Whether they are historical events or fictional figments of the human imagination, that difficult question of why they occupy such an important part of our reconstruction of the beginnings of the world remains unanswered. Any answer would be speculative, but if an answer were plausible and consonant with the specific details of flood myths, it might prove a welcome addition to flood myth scholarship. The following essay is an effort to grapple with one possible meaning of the flood myth. For a fuller statement of Frazer's meager conclusions, see *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. I (London, 1918), p. 359.

Theories of myth interpretation may be roughly divided into two major groupings: literal and symbolic. Literalists tend to seek factual or historical bases for a given mythical narrative while advocates of one of the many symbolic approaches prefer to regard the narrative as a code requiring some mode of decipherment. It is important to realize that the literal and symbolic exegeses of myths are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the specific case of the flood, there could in theory

have been an actual deluge, either local or global, but at the same time one of the reasons why the flood narrative might have diffused as widely as it undoubtedly has—even to peoples who live far inland away from natural floods—could be attributable to its symbolic content. For example, inasmuch as all human neonates are so to speak delivered from an initial flood (of amniotic fluid) when the sac breaks, it is not impossible that the creation of the world was thought to have occurred in a parallel fashion. As the individual is born, so was the world born. From the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, we can easily establish that very often the same techniques used to create humanity were used to create the world; or perhaps in terms of logic or chronologic the analogy should be stated the other way round: the identical techniques used to create the world are used to create the first man. Compare, for instance, motif A641, Universe brought forth from an egg, and motif A1222, Mankind originates from eggs, or the Earth-Diver motif (A812) in which the earth is formed from a bit of mud, and the Creation of man from earth, clay, mud, or dust (A1241).

To be sure, both literal and symbolic interpretations may be in error—that is, perhaps there was no historical universal deluge, and perhaps early peoples did not imagine any similarity between the nature of human birth and the beginning of the world. Or one interpretation may be correct and the other incorrect. What is crucial is the ability to distinguish between literal and symbolic approaches to myth in general, and in this instance to the flood myth in particular.

Because the flood myth is part of the sacred charter of much of Western (Judeo-Christian) civilization, there has been noticeable reluctance to interpret it symbolically. By far the majority of the huge spate of books and essays devoted to elucidating the flood myth have treated it as a literal phenomenon. Those discussing the issue of whether the biblical flood was a local or universal deluge did not question the historicity of the biblical account. It was simply assumed that there had been a flood to which Noah had been a participating eyewitness. This was deemed true regardless of whether the flood was local or universal. Although in general the comparative method was employed to denigrate the truth value of biblical materials—if other peoples had the same story, then it became much more difficult to maintain the uniqueness of the biblical narratives as the divine word of God—it was employed in the case of the flood in quite another way. The argument was in part that the occurrence of flood narratives among so many diverse peoples of the world, past and present, civilized and primitive, was *prima facie* "evidence" that there had indeed been a universal flood, the echoes of which survived in flood myths recounted up to

modern times. Accordingly, religious enthusiasts were not in the least put off by the large number of flood myths recorded around the world. On the contrary, they welcomed each new instance of a flood myth as further corroboration of the truth of the Genesis narrative. Thus the application of the comparative method proved nothing with respect to the historicity question. Those who believed in the literal truth of the flood myth regarded comparative data as confirmatory; those who rejected the literal reading of the biblical flood narrative pointed to the hundreds of flood myths as evidence of its noncanonical status. Probably there are only a few contemporary theologians who would contend that the widespread distribution of the flood myth was a marker of "primitive revelation"—according to which doctrine, all mankind had originally been given the divine word from God (see Schmidt, 1939). In this theoretical framework, it was presumed that primitive peoples had "lost" most of the original revelation, retaining only a few isolated vestigial fragments such as the flood myth.

The indisputable wide diffusion of the flood story proved also to be of interest to those espousing a symbolic approach to myth. For whatever the flood myth might signify in symbolic terms, it was pretty clearly something which must be relevant to a great variety of peoples and cultures. Of course, it need not be assumed that the flood myth must mean the same thing in every culture in which it appears. Still the nagging question remains: what then does the flood myth mean?

Previous attempts by symbolically inclined interpreters to decode the flood myth have generally fallen along the conventional lines of standard folklore theories. The flood story has been variously interpreted as a lunar myth (Böcklen, 1903), a solar myth (Frazer, 1918:342, nn. 1-3; Berge, 1951), or as a vegetation or fertility ritual (Follansbee, 1939). The floodwaters have also been regarded as a celestial cleansing agent to punish mankind for a blood-spilling transgression which "polluted" the antediluvial earth (Frymer-Kensky, 1978). Both Freudians (Rank, 1912) and Jungians (Kluger, 1966; Williams, 1974) see a dreamlike aspect of flood stories. Róheim expanded Rank's notion that the origin of the flood myth might be sought in vesical dreams in which the urge to urinate during the night was expressed in dream format. According to Róheim, "Flood myths frequently represent the flood as urine, thereby revealing their dream origin" (1952:448). For Rank and Róheim, therefore, flood myths are derivatives of dreams expressing a need to urinate. If that is all there is to flood myths, how can we account for all the details of various flood myths? Why is the flood so often used as a means of punishing mankind for various sins? How is the flood myth to be explained as a re-creation myth, that is, a sec-

primary creation following the destruction of the world produced by the first creation? How can urination as a primal cause satisfactorily account for the explicitly punitive and creative aspects of flood myths?

In order to interpret the symbolic content of flood myths, we need to establish several axioms. First of all, I would contend that the relationship of god to man is essentially that of parent to child. This is Freud's astute insight in *The Future of an Illusion* as modified by Kardiner's revision of Freudian theory (1939, 1945). Kardiner's revision consists of culturally relativizing the Freudian notion. To the extent that parent-child relationships differ from culture to culture, so the god-man relationship will vary accordingly. It should be remarked that the hypothetical isomorphism or congruence of infantile training with adult projective systems (which include myths) can be empirically tested in diverse cultures. It is by no means a matter of accepting the Kardinerian-Freudian formulation on faith. Either there is a parallelism of structure and content or there is not.

Secondly, I maintain that males envy female parturition. The principle of male pregnancy is well documented—there are numerous instances in the patriarchal Old Testament. The creation of Eve from Adam's rib is an obvious reversal of biological reality insofar as man creates woman from his body. Moreover, it is quite likely that the crucial male bone in question is not the rib at all but the phallus, which lacks the *os baculum* found in some other animals. As woman gives birth to males from her genital area, it is psychologically reasonable for man to fantasize giving birth to females from his genital area (Dundes, 1983).

Now what has all this to do with the symbolic content of flood myths? For one thing, most flood myths involve male gods destroying the world but saving a male survivor to repopulate the earth. It is, in sum, a male creation myth with little if any mention of females. Noah's wife does not even have a first name (see Uiley, 1941)—just as Lot's wife is nameless. (The Lot story is typologically and structurally similar to the Noah story.) But why does a male create or re-create the world by means of a flood? I would argue that it is because a flood constitutes a cosmogonic projection of the standard means by which every child-bearing female creates (see Bertine, 1944:48; Pratt, 1955:68). It is the bursting of the sac releasing the amniotic fluids which announces the birth of each newborn baby. As the anthropologist Donald F. Tuzin put it in his study of Arapesh water symbolism in New Guinea (1977:220): "Anyone witnessing a childbirth cannot fail to notice that the event is accompanied by a forcible discharge of an impressive volume of water." This is the primordial flood which is repeated anew with every

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generation. But in male-produced myths, the male must use whatever means he has to create a flood. As the female flood seemingly emerges from her genital area, so it makes (psychological sense for the male) flood to come from his genital area. So here we have a rationale for a urinal flood. When Róheim observed that flood myths frequently represent the flood as urine, he was on the right (urinary) track. But he erred in assuming that these urinary flood myths must have stemmed from a dream source. It is far more likely that both dreams and myths are reflections of unconscious wishes. There is no need to assume that dreams are necessarily antecedent to myths. For that matter, one could just as well argue that individual dreams in a given culture reflect the myths that the dreamer has heard. In any case, the proposition is that flood myths are an example of males seeking to imitate female creativity.

Is there any evidence to support this interpretation? Certainly the connection postulated between pregnancy envy on the part of males and urinary flood is explicitly articulated in myth texts. A striking instance is afforded by a Chukchee creation myth reported by Bogoras (1910:151–154). The culture hero Raven and his wife live alone on a small plot of ground. Raven's wife tells him, "Better go and try to create the earth!" He replies, "I cannot, truly!" Shortly thereafter, Raven observes his wife asleep. "Again he looks at his wife. Her abdomen has enlarged. In her sleep she creates without any effort. He is frightened and turns his face away." His wife then delivers twins. Raven's response is interesting. "There, you have created men! Now I shall go and try to create the earth. . . . Raven flies and defecates. Every piece of excrement falls upon water, grows quickly, and becomes land." But the creation is insufficient, for there is no fresh water. "Oh," says Raven, "shall I try again?" He begins to pass water. "Where one drop falls, it becomes a lake; where a jet falls, it becomes a river. . . . Oh, Raven, the good fellow, flew farther on. He strains himself to the utmost, creates ground, exhausts himself, and creates water for the rivers and lakes." This creation myth demonstrates how men compete with procreative women. By anal means, the earth is created (see Dundes, 1962): by urinary means, the waters of the earth are created. In this Chukchee myth, the male's actions are specifically precipitated by observing the "natural" creativity of females. Now one can better understand the existence of motifs A923.1, Ocean from urine, and A1012.2, Flood from urine, and the urinary flood myths assembled by Róheim (1952:439–465). By the same token, it is now possible to appreciate such curious flood myth details as the fact that the water in question is *hot*! Motif A1016.2, Deluge produced by hot liquid which burns as it floods, is intelligible, as

is the common motif in Islamic (and Jewish) tradition of the "hot water" which flows over the earth (Rooth, 1962:67). Even more fascinating is the additional facet of the popular Islamic tradition which reports that "the sign of the beginning of the flood was that *water began to flow out of the oven*" (Rooth, 1962:88). The oven is a standard womb symbol (Freud, 1953:170). When the folk claim that the beginning of the flood is marked by hot water coming out of an oven, they offer confirmation of the basic symbolism hypothesized here.

We may now better comprehend a flood myth from the Jivaro Indians of the Amazon, a myth which puzzled Frazer. He spoke of a tradition.

more or less confused, of a great deluge which happened long ago. They say that a great cloud fell from heaven, which turned into rain and caused the death of all the inhabitants of the earth; only an old man and his two sons were saved, and it was they who repopulated the earth after the deluge, though how they contrived to do so without the assistance of a woman is a detail about which our authority does not deign to enlighten us. However that may be, one of the two sons who survived was cursed by his father, and the jibaros are descended from him. The curse may be a reminiscence of the story of Noah and his sons recorded in Genesis, of which the jibaros may have heard through missionaries. The difficulty of propagating the human species without the help of the female sex would seem to have struck the acuter minds among the jibaros, for according to some of them the survivors of the deluge were a man and a woman. (Frazer, 1918:260-261)

What Frazer failed to realize is that if the myth were designed to demonstrate male procreative abilities, then it makes perfect sense for the action to take place without the help of a female. It is always risky to call a tradition "more or less confused." More often, it is the analyst of myth who is more or less confused!

It has often been suggested that flood myths "are closely linked with creation myths; the flood wipes out the old creation and a new creation begins" (Barnard, 1966:153). However, it might be more apt to say that the flood is not so much a creation myth as a re-creation myth. (The original creation, biologically speaking, is obviously from women and so men, to repudiate women's natural procreative superiority, must "destroy" the *first* creation and substitute a second creation of their own. For a discussion of the flood as "uncreation" see Clines, 1972:136-138.) In the myths, man is first created and then nearly destroyed before surviving a flood. This pattern is seemingly analogous to the details of human birth. The flood of amniotic fluids released at birth does not create the fetus-infant. The creation took place nine

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months before the flood of birth. Birth releases an already fully formed neonate who has been floating around the womb for approximately nine months. (It is noteworthy that many cosmologies, including our own Judeo-Christian one, begin with "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep." The common notions of darkness and floating could derive from the prenatal intra-uterine experience that all men and women share. Even so-called modern theories of the "expanding universe" could reflect that same intrauterine experience.) Thus in Genesis it is a male Noah who builds an ark-womb. Similarly, in the widespread Earth Diver myth (see Mitra, 1929; Walk, 1933; Schmidt, 1937; Count, 1952; König, 1960; Eliade, 1961; Dundes, 1962) it is an already created *male* who dives into the deluge to seek a bit of mud with which to re-create the earth.

Those who might consider a male urinal flood as a farfetched theory will have to find some alternative way of explaining the existence of myths in which floods are produced through micturition (see motif A1012.2, Flood from urine). The very existence of such myths—myths, incidentally, composed and transmitted by individuals who have never heard of Freud or psychoanalytic theory—would at least suggest that the connection between urination and flooding is not a Freudian invention. In retrospect, we can see that Rank and Rohm were correct as far as they went, but the flood myth is not simply a dream translation of a basic bodily need to urinate. Rather it is a male creation myth modeled after the female flood, the release of amniotic fluids. As the individual is created or brought forth by females, so the world is created or "re-created" by males. If Eliade (1958:212) is correct in equating baptism with a ritual enactment of the deluge, then it is surely significant that baptisms are traditionally performed by *men*.

The use of urine in a punitive context is also plausible, although admittedly more difficult to document. In American folk speech, the idiom "to piss on it" is undeniably a metaphor of repudiation. The lack of extensive ethnographic data on urination practices makes it problematic to assert that there may be some cross-cultural agreement on the technique of urinating on someone to show disgust or contempt. It is, though, at the very least possible and certainly tenable.

"To make water" is another idiom referring to urination which may be relevant. It would seem to constitute another bit of linguistic data supporting the idea that urinating can be perceived as a creative flood-producing act. Urine and semen may be equivalent in the folk mind. The Hebrew word for water can also mean semen, for example, just as "*mayeh*, water, in colloquial Arabic is used also as the name of male semen, the life medium" (Canaan, 1929:58; see also Walker, 1976:52). In Isaiah 48:1, the people of the house of Jacob "are come

forth out of the waters of Judah." Moreover, the association between the male organ which produces posterity and the same organ's ability to urinate is signaled by the standard threat in the Bible (1 Kings 21:21): "Behold, I will bring evil upon thee and will take away thy posterity and will cut off from Ahab him that pisseth against the wall" (see also 1 Kings 14:10 and 16:11). The urinary cast of so many flood myths might also help explain why in some myths the primeval floodwaters are initially contained in a (chamber) pot. In such texts, breaking the pot releases the urinary flood. If urine = semen = water, then a male *procreative* myth might well have a male culture hero or deity producing a urinary flood.

This new perspective on flood myths allows us to understand for the first time some of the other, more puzzling, aspects of such myths. Consider what is perhaps one of the oldest known versions of the flood myth, a Babylonian account which states that the gods are annoyed by "the clamor of mankind. By their uproar they prevent sleep" (Pritchard, 1950:104). As one scholar puts it, "In the Babylonian myth of the flood, the gods decided to destroy mankind for the rather absurd reason that they had become so noisy that they prevented the gods from sleeping at nights" (Hooke, 1963:131). It has been argued that "noise" and "wickedness" are paradigmatic equivalents (Casalis, 1976:50), but this doesn't explain the apparent absurdity. If, however, God is to man as adult is to child, then the reason is not absurd at all. For the crying of infants at night does disturb the sleep of adults, making them angry enough to wish to "destroy" the noisy children in question. Just as young children can express anger through nocturnal enuresis, thereby creating a flood through bedwetting, so adult, especially males, may express anger in a similar way.

There is yet one other piece of data which supports the idea that the male organ may be intimately connected to the flood myth, and that is the widespread occurrence of incest, especially sibling incest, as a precipitating factor or consequence (see Walk, 1949; Hwei, 1955). This is an extremely common pattern in Southeast Asian myths. Often the pattern includes violation of a sexual prohibition, such as incest, which leads to a punitive flood. Frazer (1918:195) reports a flood myth from southwestern Bengal in which the flood was sent to destroy the first people who had grown incestuous.

If we examine all the "re-creation" myths in Genesis, we find precisely this pattern. A sexual taboo is ignored, which angers God who punishes the sinners by destroying their homes. The story of Adam and Eve could be perceived in this light. If Eve is born from Adam's body, then she in some sense might be considered Adam's daughter. In

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that case, it would be father-daughter incest. If Adam and Eve were created simultaneously as in one of the two creation myths in the first part of Genesis, then they could be considered brother and sister. In the Garden of Eden, initial paradise, Eve yields to the temptation of the serpent to eat from the forbidden tree. Although the fruit is not specified, tradition makes it an apple (see Heisig, 1952-1953; Laxer, 1961; Brazda, 1977:121-129), a fruit which has symbolic overtones of the breast (Freud, 1953:163; Levy, 1917-1919:19). In any event, the result of the sin is an awareness of *nakedness* which suggests a discovery of the sexual parts of the anatomy. God's response is to banish Adam and Eve from Eden, whereupon *immediately* after leaving the garden, "Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived." The point is that sexual activity takes place as the very first thing following the departure from Eden, and the peopling of the earth begins through an incestuous act.

In the Genesis flood myth, there is a curious episode (6:2-4) in which the "sons of God saw the daughters of men . . . and they took them wives." It is apparently this sexuality (see Poulet, 1942; Delcor, 1976:4) which offends God once again because there is no other explanation of "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth." Noah and his family survive the flood which God sends as a punishment. After the flood, Noah discovers wine and drinks to excess. Ham sees his father's nakedness—here too nakedness is apparently a sin, as it was in the Garden of Eden account. "To see the nakedness of someone" has been construed as a metaphor for sexual intercourse (Bassett, 1971:233) in biblical rhetoric. God is displeased and curses Canaan, the son of Ham. Apocryphal versions of the story hint at a possible homosexual adventure (Bassett, 1971).

The themes of the Noah story are repeated in the account of Lot. God is disturbed by homosexual activity in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham manages to bargain so that if God finds as many as ten righteous men in these cities, God will not destroy them. Two angels come to Sodom as investigators for God. The Sodomites find the angels attractive and ask Lot to "bring them out unto us, that we may know them" (19:5). Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the homosexual crowd as a substitute for his angel guests, an offer that is scorned. Those in the crowd are struck blind. Lot is then instructed by the angels to leave the city with his family and is told, "Look not behind thee." Lot's wife disobeys (just as Eve disobeyed) and is turned into a pillar of salt. Looking was a sin for Adam and Eve when their "eyes were opened" and they saw one another's nakedness; looking was a sin for Ham when he saw his father Noah's exposed body. Lot in a cave with his two daughters is made drunk—a clear parallel with Noah's

drunkenness. The daughters seduce their father: "Thus wove both the daughters of Lot with child by their father" (19:36). In this electrical plot, the mother is conveniently out of the way, leaving the father to the daughters' sexual advances, a point seemingly missed by folklorists and anthropological studies of the story (see, for example, Cockburn, 1949; Aycock, 1983). But more strikingly we have a destruction of the world, or a part thereof, followed by an incestuous union to repopulate the earth. While father-daughter incest is more rare—the typical incestuous couple is brother and sister—incest is a common aftermath of a world destruction myth. The clear-cut connection between destruction of the world (for example, through flood) and the incest motif in Genesis seems directly parallel, if not cognate, with flood myths in Southeast Asia and China. It is noteworthy that right after Lot's daughters seduce their father, we have an episode when Abraham pretends that his wife Sarah is his sister so that Abimelech will not harm them—once more a play upon the ubiquitous incest theme. It has been established that the wife-sister motif is a recurring element in Genesis (Speiser, 1967).

There is a great dispute over the meaning and significance of the introduction to the Noachian flood with respect to the "sons of God" mating with the "daughters of men." Were the "sons of God" fallen angels (Poulet, 1942)? Whoever they were, it is clear that it was essentially a sexual act which precipitated the flood—in this sense, an action similar to the one which led to God to expel Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and, in a roughly analogous way, parallel to the sexual excesses which motivated God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In all three "uncreations," it is sexuality or lust which constituted the "original" sin.

This sexuality, and especially its incestuous aspects, is directly related to the idea of creation myths as expressions of male fantasy. Of course, as has been observed (Moore, 1964:1309): "Any myth about the creation of man which postulates a single first family is bound to give rise to some incestuous riddles. Who married the children of the first couple?" After observing the incidence of incest motifs in Genesis, Leach suggests that the logical basis of incest categories "must occur in all mythologies" (1963:15). He contends further that "the original first parents engage in sex relations . . . in a union that is contaminated with the sin of abnormality. The function of flood stories is to destroy this first Creation and its ambiguities and to start again" (1963:14-15). But what Leach neglects to point out is that *after* the flood or destruction (in Lot's case), sexual activity, often incestuous, takes place.

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It is true that unless a creator has exceptional foresight, the creation of one original man or even an original human couple cannot avoid the incest issue. How can the original man or couple possibly repopulate the earth without incest? The rationale for the incest taboo has never been satisfactorily explained despite a host of theoretical attempts to do so. Although incest may be defined differently in various cultures, it does seem to be universal. In some cultures, first-cousin marriage is not only permitted but is the preferred means of spouse selection. Cross-cousin marriage (when the children of opposite-sex siblings marry) is in fact a form of symbolic sibling incest one step removed (see Moore, 1964). One thing is certain, though: the existence of any kind of incest taboo attests to the fact that there is a desire for incest. No prohibition would come into existence if there were no human tendency to indulge in the proscribed behavior.

From the point of view that the flood is a male myth of creation, it is not at all unreasonable to understand incest as part of male fantasy. In terms of that fantasy, male creators can engage in sexual intercourse with mothers, sisters, and daughters—in addition to destroying previous female procreativity through a urinary flood and re-creating the world and man through anal means (manipulating mud or a more desiccated version: dust). In this light, we can better appreciate the details of a myth from the Toradjas of Central Celebes recounted by Frazer (1918:222) in which a pregnant woman survives the flood. "She in due time gave birth to a son, whom she took for want of another to be her husband. By him she had a son and a daughter, who became the ancestors of the present race of mankind." Here we have mother-son incest followed by brother-sister incest. The father's absence encourages the mother to take her own son as husband (just as the loss of Lot's wife encourages father-daughter incest).

If we consider patriarchal myths, including the flood myth, in the context of male psychology, we find consistent themes. The first is Oedipal insofar as a father figure forbids sexuality, a son figure violates the interdiction, and the son is punished for his sexual transgression. Despite the punishment, some fantasy is still possible: Noah goes on to get drunk and Lot commits incest with his daughters. Although in theory it is the righteous who are spared, in practice it is these same individuals who go on sinning! The second theme involves a male versus female opposition (rather than male versus older male). In this second theme, which has not been adequately recognized by psychoanalytically informed critics, we typically have males attempting to usurp female procreativity. It is male gods who create the earth; it is females

who are born from males' bodies (Athena being a perfect "birthless" of Zeus); it is males who produce (urinary) floods in place of the amniotic ones produced by females. The pain of parturition becomes transformed into a male fantasy of inflicting wholesale destruction on the world.

Finally, if flood myths are truly male myths of creation, we can better understand why male scholars, including theologians, have been so concerned with studying them. Just as a male-dominated society created the myths in the first place, so modern males, increasingly threatened by what they perceive as angry females dissatisfied with ancient myths which give priority to males, cling desperately to these traditional expressions of mythopoetic magic. The flood myth in Genesis belongs to a patriarchal period of human history and as such constitutes a sacred charter for man's privileged position in the world. The vehemence and vigor with which defenders of the faith insist that the flood myth represents historical (and not psychological) reality may well involve much more than a test of Judeo-Christian dogma and belief. It may represent instead or in addition a last bastion of male self-delusion.

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