NOAH IN RABBINIC LITERATURE*

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1. Introduction

The figure of Noah as it is reflected in rabbinic literature is quite different from the one found in Second Temple literature. In contrast to the central role Noah plays in 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and the Genesis Apocryphon, practically rising to the position of a redeemer, his role in rabbinic literature is not intensified. The rabbis' attitude toward him is ambiguous: he is recognized as the hero of the flood, but at the same time his sins are mentioned.

This change of roles has led some scholars to consider the possibility that there was an anti-Noachic polemic intended to diminish his significance. The main argument of this essay is that there are no signs of a systematic polemic, since the ambiguity regarding Noah also conveys positive attitudes toward his figure. The source of this ambiguity, therefore, is to be found in the bibli-

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1. On Noah in Second Temple literature, see Bernstein 1999; 2005; Dimant 1998; Feldman 1988a (cf. 1998b, 17–37); 2003; Lewis 1968, 10–81; Segal 2007, 145–67; Stone 1999; VanderKam 1980; 1992a. Note that some of these authors hold a different view regarding Noah in Second Temple literature than the one assumed above. Feldman seems to draw a continuum of Noah's figure between Second Temple times and rabbinic traditions, while Bernstein stresses that the Noah and the flood traditions do not gain a unified treatment in Qumran or in other Second Temple literature (1999, 223).

2. See Kaplan 1931 and, more elaborately, Koltun-Fromm 1997. Baumgarten argues that certain polemical strands can be found as early as the biblical narrative itself. The postdiluvian narrative is intended to ensure that the hero of the flood is not apotheosized as in the Mesopotamian traditions (Baumgarten 1975, 61; cf. Noort 1999, 27–30). For an argument of a very different nature against Noah, see Orlov 2007, 361–96.

3. I have long struggled over the question of the lack of a systematic approach regarding Noah. Should this be ascribed merely to a polysemic tendency of midrash, allowing
fore remains obscure in relation to the question of Noah’s righteousness on this point.

3. Conclusion

A review of rabbinic traditions concerning Noah shows that there is a lack of consistency in their portrayal of Noah. Some rabbis describe him as a righteous man, a man of valor, courage, and piety, while others take him to be a reluctant hero, defiant, and perhaps even an outright sinner. It is my contention that this inconsistency is due to the biblical narrative, itself inconsistent due to various sources and traditions that were brought together.

Quantitatively speaking, there seem to be more midrashim that relate to Noah favorably or neutrally. This is an important factor when asserting that a polemic against Noah was not a major concern for the rabbis. Had they been concerned with Noah's role as a prototype for Jesus or his not being an Israelite (not to mention a pre-Abrahamic and pre-Mosaic hero), we would not expect to have the ambiguity and diversity of opinions of Noah throughout rabbinic literature. The fact that such a significant mass of midrashim speak favorably of Noah weakens the possibility that the rabbis were concerned by an understanding of Noah as prefiguring Jesus or by him being a hero although he is not an Israelite.58

Another factor is the fact that even the dicta against him seem strongly tied to the biblical text, not to external traditions. The quantitative factor is also easily understood when considering that he is supposed to be the only person God chose to survive the flood. Deriding his character too much might imply a criticism of God.

Noah’s figure became prominent in certain circles in Second Temple literature. Attributing divine knowledge to him was a good exegetical move in explaining his offering of a sacrifice. The rise of interest in astronomy gave way to an interest in primordial knowledge that was not given to Moses on Sinai. In this context, Noah and Enoch played a significant role.59 Within rabbinic Judaism the interest in these issues decreased and eventually disappeared. Moreover, the rabbinic traditions about Noah do not seem aware of these traditions as a whole, even less of their theological and social implications. Even if they were aware of some of the Noah and Enoch traditions of the Second Temple, they generally do not seem to be intimidated by or motivated to contest them.