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When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary
Readings of Noah's Flood (review)

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periods. Some of the individuals who figure prominently in this book, such as Ashraf Jahangir Simnani and Shah Mina of Lucknow, though remembered primarily as Chishti saints, were initiated into multiple orders. There are also those who were initiated and initiated others into the Chishtiyya but are seen as belonging to other orders. The biographies of the early Chishti saints provided in the Appendix are largely drawn from the work of the “Qadiri loyalist” ‘Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi. Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi, discussed in chapter 6, “Colonial Chishtis,” is better known as a proponent of the Deobandi tradition of legalistic reform. Such figures pose a challenge to any simple understanding of a Chishti identity. While *Sufi Martyrs of Love* exposes the complexities of the Chishtiyya, one is still left wondering what it means to be affiliated to a particular Sufi order, or to venerate its saints, within the context of multiple, and often competing, Sufi and Islamic commitments.

For further research into such questions, Ernst and Lawrence provide an invaluable resource in the two bibliographies appended to *Sufi Martyrs of Love*. The first is a comprehensive listing of scholarship and primary source translations in European languages. The second is a selective bibliography of sources in Persian and Urdu, ranging from thirteenth-century Sufi compositions to contemporary scholarship, and including both manuscript and printed materials. These bibliographies are in themselves sufficient to make *Sufi Martyrs of Love* an indispensable starting point for further study of the Chishti Order.

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When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood. By J. David Pleins. Oxford University Press, 2003. 242 pages. \$29.95.

Pleins is a professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University. His specialty is Near Eastern literature and mythology. The biblical flood account is a fascinating story, and many similar stories are found in the ancient literature around the world. This fact has no bearing on the historicity of the story for Pleins, however. The power of the Flood story is not, in his view, derived from any necessary event. Rather, he reads the Genesis account as a myth that shaped Middle Eastern culture and that continued to frame human history throughout the centuries. Moreover, Pleins remains persuaded that the so-called documentary hypothesis is a valid analytical literary tool, despite the strong criticisms leveled against this hermeneutical methodology in recent years. In Genesis 1–3 the two supposed documentary accounts follow one after the other, but in the Genesis Flood story a surprising intertwining of the two very different J and P stories (which Pleins attempts to separate for us in an Appendix) seems to have been the supposed compiler's approach.

Pleins believes that historically there have been four basic readings of the story: the *strict literalist* (which believes in an ancient global flood, a historical Noah, a universal destruction of people and animals, except for those on an actual boat, and so forth); the *loose literalist* (which believes the flood was a major but a local event, and which might believe that the story, while perhaps an exaggerated account, still has important symbolic meaning); the *secularist* (which believes that geology and science in general has shown that no worldwide flood is possible and thus believes the story is only a legend, that it is not true and, therefore, has no value for modern man); and the *mythologist* (which agrees that the story is scientifically and historically impossible, but affirms that it is nevertheless a story with profound power to shape ideas and to form attitudes even in cultures far removed from the original one). All reading styles have strengths and weaknesses, but the mythological reading is, in Pleins' view, the best.

Caricatures abound in the description of the literalists: they are supposedly trying to dig up God through archeology; they are described as desperately clinging to scientific impossibilities and it is implied that they simply do not understand the story in terms of its essential meaning. Secularists fall to a similar fate when they confidently seek to destroy any shred of scientific credibility for the event and thus believe they have destroyed the meaning of the story.

Scholarly efforts to demonstrate literary unity in the Genesis text are, according to Pleins, disingenuous. He is particularly critical of G. Wenham's article in *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978) that structurally sets forth the story as an impressive chiasmus. Wenham's theory, says Pleins, is full of holes. Pleins does not evaluate more sophisticated arguments for literary unity, such as those set forth by K. Mathews in his *New American Commentary on Genesis* (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996).

Pleins, from his assumption that the story is a powerful myth, examines not so much the issues of weather, construction techniques, animal husbandry, widespread wickedness, or divine judgment, but rather he focuses more on such things as the misuse of the story (in particular the part about Noah's curse on Ham's son, Canaan). It is well known that this was used as partial justification for the enslavement of Africans in the nineteenth-century American South. Pleins gives a helpful review of the variety of readings this story was given in that context. He also spends a chapter on Noah's wife, or to be more accurate, on her virtual absence from the biblical text and on the absence of female characters generally in the hero myths of the ancient world. Not unexpectedly Pleins is interested in quickly dismissing "creation science" as not being "science" at all and, further, seeking to disprove the suggestion that either Noah's curse or the Canaanite Sodom (Genesis 18-19) may have had anything to do with homosexuality.

One of the chapters provides a very interesting summary of the long history of "flood geology" and its impact on the development of modern geology. Though Pleins considers "flood geology" to be a dead science today, there is no doubt about the influence this interpretive structure had up through the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, only special creationists continued to work with this model that seeks to explain worldwide fossil beds as part of the evidence for the reality of the worldwide nature of the Genesis Flood and

suggested that many fossil collections are ecological groupings, rather than simple chronological evolutionary groupings.

For Pleins, the flood story is best understood as a part of the ancient biblical belief that God ruled over the ancient seas. God is not only a judge, but a provider of hope. The sixth-century B.C. Jewish exiles in Babylon may have been responsible for the final form of the story, Pleins supposes, thus giving themselves a basis for hope that they would survive their own major cultural displacement.

Pleins correctly argues that racism is not supported by any authentic reading of the biblical text, though such misinterpretations arose primarily within a literalist hermeneutic. It is the careful literal reading that most effectively refutes the racist interpretation. However, the text remains problematic for Pleins in that it does seem to advocate violence toward and subjugation of one family of people, the Canaanites, to another, the descendants of Shem. Nevertheless the Flood story in general remains as an unrooted force that assures many people that their religious confidence is well placed (no matter which religious tradition they may follow).

This book is truly fascinating, though not completely convincing. The multiple recounting of the stories of the Flood in virtually all ancient (not merely Middle Eastern) cultures makes far more sense to many of us if we assume that some meaningful historical event lies behind the story; not Pitman and Ryan's event (as I have argued elsewhere), but some event, possibly one so large as to escape the kind of scientific analysis that is typically applied (such as Wooley's mud layers, etc.). It is noteworthy how often the biblical flood story has shaped comprehensive historical accounts, from ancient rabbinical speculations to Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614) and beyond. Pleins cannot accept a historical reading, however, and therefore is effectively left only with mythology (which he considers to be more than adequate). He provides a good bibliography (though lacking in certain categories), but he does not provide a Scripture index nor any extensive comments on the New Testament references to Noah and the Flood (such as Matthew 24:37–39; Hebrews 11:7; and 1 Peter 3:20; and 2 Peter 2:5).

The book is full of interesting information even if, in the final analysis, some of us remain unpersuaded of the mythological reading. No one else has given us such sustained readability in an effort to summarize the historical and cultural impact through the centuries of the biblical Flood story; nor have many offered such comprehensive coverage of the literary and theological nuances of the main movements of this biblical story in quite the style and breadth as has Pleins. He has certainly motivated me to re-think the story, and in doing so with the new eyes he gave, many insights have come. The mythological reading is fruitful for many purposes, but for those who have not found traditional documentary theories to be sustainable in this case, there is yet more to be said. No one who writes on this subject in the future, however, will successfully ignore this work by Pleins.