

# Retelling Biblical Stories for a Modern Audience

By Brian Godawa

In my new novel, *Noah Primeval*, I retell the story of the Biblical Noah as a nomadic tribal warrior. He refuses to worship the divine council of gods in Mesopotamia and is subsequently hunted down by assassin giants, leading the chase through Sheol, and ending in a climactic battle involving Leviathan and other hybrid monsters.

“What?” you may say. *That’s* not in the Bible! That sounds more like the non-canonical book of Enoch or the fantasy world of *The Lord of the Rings* than *Holy Scripture*. Isn’t that mythologizing the Bible?

It is hard enough to get some religious believers to appreciate the imagination of the fantasy genre. But when it comes to retelling a story from the Bible, don’t even think of putting those two things together; Bible and fantasy. That borders on tampering with the Word of God worthy of the curse in Revelation 21 on those who “add or take away from the words of the book.” Or at least that’s what some well-meaning believers think.

I think this negative impulse comes from an essentially good intent; the desire to avoid denigrating their sacred stories or reducing them to the level of false pagan myths. But such good intent does not necessarily produce the good result of a well thought out Biblical understanding of story.<sup>1</sup>

What would surprise many of these concerned believers is the fact that the same ancient Hebrews who championed the Scriptures as their sacred text containing the very words of God, were also the ones who wrote those Scriptures utilizing pagan imagination and motifs. And they were also the same ancient believers who wrote many other non-canonical texts that retold Biblical stories with fantastic embellishments worthy of mythopoeic masters.

## **Subverted Pagan Imagination**

I have written elsewhere about the extensive use of Canaanite poetry and imagination by Bible authors to express God’s own imagination.<sup>2</sup> The Bible redeems pagan imagination by using its motifs and baptizing them with altered subversive definitions that support Yahweh, the God of the Jewish Scriptures against Baal, the god of Canaan, and other pagan deities in the ancient Near East.

Two examples of this redemptive subversion that show up in *Noah Primeval* are Leviathan and the divine council of the Sons of God. It appears that Yahweh was not only interested in dispossessing the Canaanite people from the Promised Land, he was interested in dispossessing

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<sup>1</sup> The curse of Revelation 21, is not a reference to the entire Bible, but the prophecy of the particular book of Revelation. Also, the context is not about taking away individual words but about taking away or adding to the *content* of the prophecy. If it were words, then we are all condemned because we do not have the original words, but only English translations based on many different copied manuscripts with lots of different textual variations. In other words our book of Revelation contains added words and taken away words.

<sup>2</sup> [http://godawa.com/Writing/Articles\\_And\\_Essays.html](http://godawa.com/Writing/Articles_And_Essays.html)

their narrative, because the Bible embodies a subversion of Canaanite imagination within its own narrative.

Baal, the storm god, was the chief deity of the land of Canaan in the time of the Israelite conquest. Canaanite myths depict Baal as a “cloud rider” who defeats the River and the Sea, as well as the Sea Dragon called “Leviathan,” (a symbol of chaos) in order to claim his eternal dominion.<sup>3</sup>

In polemical response to this mythology, the Biblical writers describe Yahweh as a “cloud rider” (Isa 19:1; Psa 104:3-4), who defeats the River and Sea (Hab 3:8), as well as the Sea Dragon, “Leviathan,” (Isa 89:6-12) in order to establish his eternal dominion (Psa 89:19-29). It appears that Yahweh, in consort with the human authors of the Bible, is subversively using the pagan cultural motifs and thought-forms of the day to say, “Baal is not God, Yahweh is God.”

In Psalm 74, 89, Isa 27, and Isa 51 the story of the Exodus crossing of the Red Sea is described with the imaginative terms of creating the heavens and earth, crushing the head of Leviathan, and binding the chaos waters of the sea in order to establish Yahweh’s covenantal dominion on the earth in his people. This is history mixed in with mythopoetic imagination to describe the theological significance of what is taking place – just like other ancient Near Eastern religions did.<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of Canaanite pagan mythology that is redeemed in the Scriptures is the divine council of the Sons of God. In the sacred Baal texts we read about an assembly of the “Sons of El,” the father deity of the pantheon. Baal is a vice regent who ascends to the throne of El and rules over the other gods of the council, who then do his bidding.<sup>5</sup>

In the Bible, God (called “El” or “Elohim”) presides over a divine council or assembly of the “Sons of God”, (Psa 82:1; 89:5-7) who also give advice in judicial decisions of Yahweh (Psa 82), and carry out his bidding as well (Job 1:6-12; 1King 22:19-22). A deified figure called the Son of Man is a vice regent who ascends to God’s throne surrounded by those “holy ones” who do his bidding (Dan 7:9-14).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, there are significant differences that separate the monotheistic Biblical divine council and the polytheistic pagan Canaanite divine council. As one example illustrates, the Biblical divine council are not to be worshipped, as God is; while the Canaanite divine council were worshipped.<sup>7</sup> Big similarities, but bigger differences. Biblical imagination is not engaging in

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<sup>3</sup> See Wyatt, N. *Religious Texts from Ugarit*. 2nd ed. Biblical seminar, 53. (London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). Also, Brian Godawa, “Old Testament Storytelling Apologetics,” <http://godawa.com/Writing/Articles/OTStoryApologetics-CRJournal.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See my article “Biblical Creation and Storytelling: Cosmogony, Combat and Covenant” for a detailed explanation of this ANE technique: <http://godawa.com/Writing/Articles/BiblicalCreationStorytelling-Godawa.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See Michael S. Heiser, *The Divine Council In Late Canonical And Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2004) 34-41: [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fac\\_dis/93/](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fac_dis/93/); Patrick D. Miller, “Cosmology And World Order In The Old Testament The Divine Council As Cosmic-Political Symbol” *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays by Patrick D. Miller*, (NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Heiser’s writings on the divine council in the Bible at <http://thedivinecouncil.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> For more differences explained, see Gerald Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, n.s.:35:1 (1964), p 45-46.

syncretism (blending opposing views), but in subversion (infiltrating and overthrowing an opposing view). The commonalities show a clear cultural connection that is subversively redeemed and redefined in the Biblical understanding of the concept. God incorporates pagan imagination and motifs into his own narrative and subverts them through redefinition and poetic usage.

So that's what I did in *Noah Primeval*. I retold the story of Noah, utilizing mythopoeic notions of Leviathan as a personification of chaos, speculation on the Sons of God as the divine council, as well as the incorporation of other Mesopotamian imagery in order to give a theological explanation for the true origins and partial reality of pagan mythology.

Don't worry, it's not as head trippy as all this *academicspeak* may sound. This is just the deep stuff behind the exciting fantasy action adventure in the novel. But there are appendixes in the book for those who want to explore the Biblical and ANE research more in depth.

### **Retelling Bible Stories**

The ancient Jews loved to retell their Bible stories with embellishments. And they did so, not with a disdain for “the facts of history”, but rather with deep respect for the original *message* as they understood it. As scholar George Nickelsburg explains, they wanted to “expound sacred tradition so that it speaks to contemporary times and issues.”<sup>8</sup> Biblical scholar Peter Enns adds, “It is a characteristic of ancient retellings of Scripture that the exegetical traditions incorporated in to these retellings are not clearly (if at all) marked off from the Biblical texts. The line between text and comment was often blurred, so much so that the two often went hand in hand.”<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to manuscript discoveries in recent centuries, we now have access to many of these Jewish retellings of Bible narratives, some of which include *Jubilees*, *The Genesis Apocryphon*, *The Testament of Moses*, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the *Books of Adam and Eve* and others. In these non-canonical texts we are retold, with creative embellishments, various episodes in Biblical history, from Adam and Eve, to Noah, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to Moses and more.

But one of the most fascinating of these texts is the book of *1 Enoch*. Written some time around the third to second century B.C., this text has both haunted and been cherished by the Christian Church through its history. It is apocalyptic in genre; cloaking warnings of judgment in dream visions, parables and complex metaphoric imagery. But it is most well known for its detailed elaboration of the Genesis 6 story about the Sons of God (called “Watchers”) and their intimate involvement in the cause of the Noachian Flood. There it describes in much detail the Watchers as fallen angels revealing occultic secrets to mankind, having intercourse with human women, and birthing giants who cause terror across the land.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> George W. E. Nickelsburg and Klaus Baltzer, *1 Enoch : A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch*, 29 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus Retold: Ancient Exegesis of the Departure from Egypt in Wisdom 15-21 and 19:1-9*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Enoch chapters 1-36 is called the “Book of the Watchers” and deals with this material. The book of *Jubilees* is another respected text that contains a detailed retelling of the Noah story with Watchers cohabiting with women, and birthing giants. See *Jubilees* 4-10 and 20:4-5.

Just what contemporary situation is Enoch referring to in his apocalyptic prose? Some scholars think its origin around the time of the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C. makes it a prophetic denunciation of the religious corruption of the Jewish world by its Hellenistic occupiers.<sup>11</sup> This pagan occupation would soon be overthrown by the victorious exploits of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, returning Judaism to its purity and inspiring the origins of the festival of Hanukkah. So the author of Enoch was engaging in a rich tradition of retelling a Biblical story of judgment on a corrupted and compromised world as a moral warning for those of his own time. It was also part of this tradition to attribute their manuscripts to such historical luminaries as Enoch himself, not as a lie but as a literary technique that reinforces the significance of the message.

Though *1 Enoch* is not in the Western canon of Scriptures, it is in the Eastern Ethiopic canon, and was respected by Christian scholars and authorities throughout the early church. It was never considered heretical by church authorities. But the real kicker is that the New Testament even refers favorably to the book of Enoch in 1Pet 3:19-20, 2Peter 2:4-10, and Jude 6-14.

Firstly, Jude quotes the book of 1 Enoch outright when he writes of false teachers corrupting the church,

“[T]hat Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Here is the text from the actual book of 1 Enoch 1:9 that Jude is quoting:

“And behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones to execute judgement upon all, and to destroy all the ungodly: And to convict all flesh of all the works of their ungodliness which they have ungodly committed, and of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.”<sup>12</sup>

But not only does Jude explicitly quote a passage out of 1 Enoch regarding God coming with the judgment of his divine council of holy ones (Sons of God), but all three texts refer to the Enochian notion of the angelic Watchers being punished for co-habiting with humans as a violation of the divine/human separation; another main theme of 1 Enoch:

**1 Enoch 10:12; 19:1**

Bind them [the fallen Watchers] for seventy generations underneath the rocks of the ground until the day of their judgment and of their consummation, until the

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<sup>11</sup> Charlesworth, James H. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1*. New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983, 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. Robert Henry Charles, Enoch 1:9 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004).

eternal judgment is concluded...“Here shall stand in many different appearances the spirits of the angels which have united themselves with women.”<sup>13</sup>

And just in case anyone would question this fantastical interpretation, 2Peter and Jude quote a common doublet that linked the sexual violation of the Watchers (and their giant progeny) with the sexual violation of the inhabitants of Sodom who sought sexual intercourse with angels. The common theme of both instances was the violation of heavenly and earthly separation of flesh.

Here is the list of texts containing this doublet of connection that Jude and Peter allude to. It is not found anywhere in the Old Testament, but only in non-canonical ancient Jewish texts:

### **Jude 6:6-7**

And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode. He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

### **2Pet. 2:4-10**

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah...and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter... then the Lord knows how to...keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority.

### **Sirach 16:7-8**

He forgave not the giants of old,  
Who revolted in their might.  
He spared not the place where Lot sojourned,  
Who were arrogant in their pride.<sup>14</sup>

### **Testament of Naphtali 3:4-5**

[D]iscern the Lord who made all things, so that you do not become like Sodom, which departed from the order of nature. Likewise the Watchers departed from nature's order; the Lord pronounced a curse on them at the Flood.<sup>15</sup>

### **3 Maccabees 2:4-5**

Thou didst destroy those who aforetime did iniquity, among whom were giants trusting in their strength and boldness, bringing upon them a boundless flood of

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<sup>13</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1*, 1 En 10:12; 19:1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983). 1 Peter writes of Christ during his death making “proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah.”

<sup>14</sup> *Apocrypha of the Old Testament, Volume 1*, ed. Robert Henry Charles, Sir 16:7–8. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004, 372.

<sup>15</sup> Charlesworth, James H. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 1*. New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983, 812

water. Thou didst burn up with fire and brimstone the men of Sodom, workers of arrogance, who had become known of all for their crimes, and didst make them an example to those who should come after.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Jubilees 20:4-5**

[L]et them not take to themselves wives from the daughters of Canaan; for the seed of Canaan will be rooted out of the land. And he told them of the judgment of the giants, and the judgment of the Sodomites, how they had been judged on account of their wickedness, and had died on account of their fornication, and uncleanness, and mutual corruption through fornication.<sup>17</sup>

The New Testament literary reference to non-canonical sources does not mean those sources are the inspired Word of God, nor that everything in them is true; but it certainly does illustrate that the Bible itself interacts meaningfully and favorably with interpretive exegetical traditions that engage in imaginative embellishment of Biblical stories. Unlike some Christians, God does appreciate creative imagination.

*Noah Primeval* is a story that carries on that ancient tradition of retelling Biblical stories into our own generation. It builds on the Enochian theme of the Watchers, giants, and occultic secrets; but adds to it additional fantastic but Biblical oriented imagery of the divine council of the Sons of God, Leviathan, Sheol, and the ancient Near Eastern Biblical view of a three-tiered universe.<sup>18</sup> But it also incorporates Sumerian and other Mesopotamian mythical elements in order to subvert them into the service of the narrative. It's all positively primeval.

Brian Godawa is the author of the new Biblical fantasy novel, *Noah Primeval*, now available for purchase on Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Go to [www.NoahPrimeval.com](http://www.NoahPrimeval.com) to watch a trailer, author interview, and sign up for free chapters and more information about the series, *Chronicles of the Nephilim*. Mr. Godawa is the award-winning screenwriter of the feature film *To End All Wars*, starring Kiefer Sutherland. He is also the author of the popular book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (IVP). His website for films and other books and free articles is [www.Godawa.com](http://www.Godawa.com).

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<sup>16</sup> *Apocrypha of the Old Testament, Volume 1*. ed. Robert Henry Charles, 3 Mac 2:5. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004, 164.

<sup>17</sup> *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament Volume 1*. ed. Robert Henry Charles. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004, 42.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://godawa.com/Writing/Articles/MesopotamianCosmographyBible-Godawa.pdf>