

OBEDIENCE, DISORDER, AND GRACE
IN THE NOAH MYSTERY PLAYS

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THE NOAH MYSTERY PLAYS

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the attempts made in the Noah plays of the medieval mystery cycles to adapt the basic details of the Great Flood to a much broader contemporary Christian context. Although the biblical source provides little detail, the playwrights consistently portray a Noah who, because of his obedience and meekness, qualifies to be saved from the terrible destruction. Before and after the flood, however, the nature of fallen man and the active interference of Satan continue to threaten what should be a harmonious relationship between man and God. In varying ways all of the Noah plays, including the Newcastle fragment, show that a struggle to earn God's grace must be made against the forces of disorder which occur in contemporary forms. Dramatic improvisations show parallels between Noah's wife and Eve whose complicity with Satan led to the original expulsion from Eden, or indicate the kinds of conditions under which grace may be received.

In addition, the Noah plays reveal that the events of the flood were seen as evidence of the extension of God's grace to man throughout biblical history. The escape from death which Noah and his family experience is a figure of the spiritual salvation made available through the sacrifice

of Christ. The various playwrights reveal the connection between flood and crucifixion through the use of conventions such as typology, ironic juxtapositions and scenic counterparts. As Noah may be seen as a type of Christ, those agents who initiated disorder in Eden and in the Noah plays recur in later plays as characters who reject the message of Christ and the opportunity for grace provided by His sacrifice. As a group, therefore, the Noah plays reveal the significance of the role which medieval playwrights gave to divine grace and its potential for the salvation of man.

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THE NOAH PLAY: AN INTRODUCTION

The dramatic "cycles"¹ which developed in England during the Middle Ages reveal an interesting combination of the sacred and the commonplace, of the mediocre and of the truly inspired. This form of drama centred upon religious teaching, the only apparent source of stability in a chaotic existence, but more importantly, we find in the pageants presented during the celebrations of Corpus Christi an important vehicle for the affirmation of faith and for an understanding of the place of man in God's great scheme. Further, these plays afforded playwrights ample opportunity for individual interpretation and creative expression.

Although the relative artistic merit of these plays varies widely from cycle to cycle and even within a single cycle itself, this dual purpose of presenting the teachings of the Bible and doing so in a dramatic and refreshing way is commonly fulfilled. Moreover, the undoubted popularity of the plays as they developed and endured between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries must support the argument that they reflect both the influence of religion in the lives of people and their

need and desire to be entertained through religious teaching.

We shall find in the Noah plays wide variation in the sources, both religious and secular, which the playwrights drew upon for their material. The Vulgate,² the structure of the mass, sermons, iconography, lay activity such as the skills of carpentry, and domestic conflict created by the shrewishness of contemporary wives all figure in the cycles' depiction of the nature of man and of his place in creation. In addition it is important, when evaluating the characters and analysing the dialogue, to remember the medieval world-view and the principles of typology, and to perceive the content of the cycles as the product of centuries of religious exegesis.

The medieval audience with a very real sense of immediacy could perceive a major deluge as not only an event in history but as a very real threat in the near future. To them the message that they, like figures in the Bible, might develop the kind of relationship with God which would permit them to avoid such a disaster would be very welcome indeed. This escape from physical death is, of course, rendered pale when one remembers that Christian teaching offers a spiritual escape from the finality of death brought about by original sin. If Noah, as in the plays, escapes punishment by means of covenant and

sacrifice and God's grace, man may escape damnation through the sacrifice of Christ. Thus the Noah plays prefigure the greatest gift of God to man and underlie the central theme of the cycle: that the death of Christ means life for every Christian.

Perhaps the most interesting and successful aspect of the Noah plays generally is their depiction of the forces ranged to frustrate God's plan to save man. Of these, we shall see that the nature of fallen man clearly established by the original sin in Eden provides the greatest danger. The tendency to sin persists. In following God's instructions to build the ark and to save specimens of every species, Noah is creating a kind of second Eden, but the situation also provides the opportunity to re-enact the original sin. Any hesitation, misgiving, or weakness may be seen as the basic wilfulness which led to man's ejection from Paradise; in several of the plays Noah is seen to be very weak indeed.

In addition to man's inherent weakness, there are other threats to his safety and salvation. If Noah is to avoid repeating the failure of Adam, he may well have to deal with Eve's counterpart -- his own wife. In several of the plays, this figure can be seen through her temperament and appetites to be all too ready to prevent her husband from obeying God's instructions. Her wicked

influence thus parallels the treachery of Adam's mate in the Garden of Eden, and clearly indicates that Satan's designs continue to operate in the world of men. Indeed, that the destructive role of Noah's wife is diabolical in nature is given total confirmation in one play in which Satan himself directly approaches the wife to subvert her in the manner of Eve and to lead her to duplicate the sin which drove man from the Garden. The writers of the cycles, therefore, ascribe to the character of Noah a task even more onerous than that given to the original in the Bible. He must not only complete long, exhausting, physical labour, but he must combat and defeat those powerful forces which were first set loose in Eden, but which continue to assail the righteous who genuinely wish to obey God.

In addition to the presentation of the characters and their relationships, we shall observe a number of other significant religious issues. The theme of obedience is supplemented on the structural and image levels by parallels between the play and the mass and between Noah and the priest. There are elements here which are common not only to the plays but to whole cycles which reflect an emphasis on not only religious orthodoxy but, by extension, the need for stability in all aspects of

human society.

From a close reading of the plays we find that the most significant feature of the flood events as they are portrayed in the various Noah plays is that they depict a form of God's grace which clearly prefigures the sacrifice of Christ. The survival of Noah's family is a forerunner of the salvation that Christ brings to the world, and the ordeal of Noah, the good servant, anticipates the sufferings of Christ Himself. Even in the settings in which these two biblical figures occur, we find a parallel confusion that must be replaced by the restoration of divine order. The approach which is taken by all of the Noah playwrights indicates a common understanding of the importance of the flood. It reveals their perception that this great destruction serves as sure evidence of a divine plan which, since the Creation, has been rational and coherent and designed ultimately to save mankind through the grace of God.

Although we shall find considerable variation in technique and emphasis, the elements common to the Noah plays reveal an important and uniform religious message. The example of Noah, obedient to his God but threatened by powerful influences which could lead to his destruction, becomes the situation for all living men. If they are to escape damnation, they must make themselves

subservient to God's will, and, like Noah, must receive grace which in its most significant form, the sacrifice of Christ, leads to eternal salvation.

Notes for the Introduction

¹Since the issues of this thesis are not concerned with the involvement of the medieval craft guilds, and since the term "cycle" is one that is used to refer to mystery plays generally, I have used it freely in my discussion of all the Noah plays including the one in the Ludus Coventriae and the Newcastle fragment.

²The edition used for all references is Biblia Vulgata. ed. Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado (Matriti: Biblioteca De Autores Cristianos, MCMLXV). Chapter and verse numbers are indicated in the body of the text.

CHAPTER ONE

ORDER, OBEDIENCE and GRACE

A comparative study of the Noah pageants -- the four extant cycle plays, as they are generally termed, and the Newcastle fragment -- reveals significant similarities and differences in the portrayal of the relationship between God and man. All of the playwrights concerned rely heavily upon Vulgate sources and traditional church teachings to represent the events of the Great Flood, but at first glance the plays appear to be unsuccessful in explaining the reason why God considered such drastic measures to be necessary. For many Christians the biblical account simply fails to present evidence that a reasonable relationship with the Creator is possible. Essentially, one is struck by the emotional gap which exists between God's desire for vengeance on the one hand and his readiness, according to orthodox teaching, to extend forgiveness and grace on the other. A close examination of the structure and themes of the various Noah plays, however, shows how these dramatists attempted to relate the concepts of universal order, man's obedience,

and divine love.

The original source of the material for the plays, the Vulgate, does not provide specific reasons for God's anger. The general condemnation of mankind:

Videns autem Deus quod multa malitia hominum
esset in terra, et cuncta cogitatio cordis
intenta esset ad malum omni tempore,
(Genesis (6:5))

extends to the whole world:

Corrupta est autem terra coram Deo, et
repleta est iniquitate,
(Genesis 6:11)

but this preamble to the events of the flood for all of its vigour does not provide for most readers a clear justification for God's extreme action. Of the four plays and the fragment, the Chester version remains closest to its biblical source, but may well be least satisfying as a depiction of an inspired and loving relationship between God and man. There is some attempt to humanize God's reasons for the flood in expressions that seem sincere,

Hit harmes mee so hurtefullye,
the mallice that doth now multiplie,
that sore it greeves mee inwardlye
that ever I made mon,
(11. 13-16) ¹

but there is no clear explanation of man's sin or the degree of his responsibility for the disaster to come. Similarly, the York play expresses God's regret but passes over man's sin in a mere four lines:

Syþn hays men wroght so wofully
 And synne is nowe reynand so ryffe,
 Pat me repentys and rewys for-þi
 Pat euer I made outhir man or wiffe.
 (11. 13-16) 2

Even those versions that spend more time recapitulating events since Creation, the Towneley and the Ludus Coventriae plays, provide no further details concerning man's sin, as in the case of the Towneley:

And now in grete reprufe/ full low ligis he,
 In erth hymself to stuf/ with syn that
 displeases me
 Most of all,
 (11.84-86) 3

and similarly:

But men of levyng be so owt-rage
 bothe be nyght and eke be day
 pat lesse þan synne þe soner swage
 god wyle be vengyd on vs sum way
 In dede
 Ther may no man go þer owte
 but synne regnyth in every rowte
 In every place rownde a-bowte
 Cursydnes doth sprynge and sprede.
 (Ludus, 11.18-26) 4

It appears, therefore, that all of these plays adhere very closely to the Vulgate, and that apart from the obscure possibility of sexual miscegenation on a tribal or cosmic scale (Genesis 6: 1-4), we are not to know from the mystery plays also the precise reason for the flood.

For a medieval Christian audience, indeed any Christian audience, to know or to require to know the precise reason for the deluge may be irrelevant. Perhaps it is enough that the Creator has deemed that the people

of the world have once again frustrated his plan, "All shall perish les and more/ that bargan may thay ban," (Towneley, l. 94). The situation is, of course, that men in disobedience to the divine will have wilfully allowed disorder to govern their lives. Early sermons may specify "lechery" or "avowtrye" as causes,⁵ but man's sin in the time of Noah has simply been to defy God's ordering force and to extend the offense of Adam up to the present. In essence the Noah plays depict a second fall, one which occurs after the basic pattern of man's sinful nature has been firmly established.

How essential the concept of order in the mystery plays is may be determined by comparing the introductory speeches of the Noah plays to the earlier plays in each cycle. Whether these are delivered by Noah as in Towneley and Ludus Coventriae or by God in the remaining cycles, they are no mere repetitions of the earlier plays. It is true that, with the exception of the Ludus, the speeches summarize world history, proclaim again the omnipotence of God, and express His great displeasure. Their positioning, however, so soon after man's first disobedience, the expulsion from Eden, and the murder by Cain with his ensuing banishment, (merely a couple of pageant waggons away in most cases) is significant. Successive attempts to achieve obedience have failed, and now, as God observes

in all four plays, sin is everywhere. The idea is, for example, expressed in general terms:

I, God, that all this world hath wrought,
 heaven and yearth, and all of nought,
 I see my people in deede and thought
 are sett fowle in sinne,
 (Chester, 11.1-4)

or more specifically in the passage which enumerates the Seven Deadly Sins:

Bot now before his sight/ euery liffyng leyde,
 Most party day and nyght/ syn in word and
 dede ffull bold;
 Som in pride, Ire, and enuy,
 Som in Couet (yse) & glotyny,
 Som in sloth and lechery,
 And other wise many fold.
 (Towneley, 11.49-54)

From the punishment of individual sin in the case of Adam and Cain, God proceeds to the punishment of general sin, and, because of its scale, there must be great devastation. It is, however, a devastation within context. In varying degrees God's opening speech, or that of Noah, clearly recalls the initial play in each cycle. There, in lengthy and elaborate fashion, we are told of a creation which is both magnificent and very structured. God Himself possesses qualities of perfect stability. His existence is timeless, His powers unlimited, and in three of the cycles (York being the only exception) His tri-fold nature is affirmed.⁶ The Towneley play proclaims these most economically:

Myghtfull god veray/ Maker of all that is,
Thre persons withouten nay/ oone god in
 endles blis,
Thou maide both nyght & day/ beest, fowle
 & fysh,
All creatures that lif may/ wroght thou
 at thi wish,
As thou wel myght;
The son, the moyne, verament,
Thou maide; the firmament,
The sternes also full feruent,
To shyne thou maide ful bright.

Angels thou maide ful euen/ all orders
 that is,
To haue the blis in heuen/ this did thou
 more & les,
ffull mervelus to neuen/ yit was ther
 vnkyndnes,
More bi foldis seuen/ then I can well expres.
 (11.1-13)

Each cycle, moreover, presents the first objects of creation as possessing a parallel stability. Heaven and earth counter-balance each other; in York it is heaven and hell (1. 3), and in Ludus Coventriae heaven consists of stars (1.30), and is populated with angels to act as "servauntys" (1.33). All the cycles refer to these prototypes of man often giving them (Chester Creation 1.42, York 1. 23, and Towneley 1. 142) a numerical consistency of nine ranks which echoes the number of the Trinity. The Wakefield playwright, in particular, depicts a universe that is completely balanced.⁷ Order is achieved by the process of separation or by allotting the various cosmic phenomena particular stations in space. The division of

day and night, for example, is succeeded in turn by the juxtaposition of earth and sea, sun and moon, stars and planets, and fish and beasts (ll. 19-60). A single verse serves to illustrate the impression of stability conveyed by God's opening summary:

Son & moyne set in the heuen,
 With starnes, & the planetys seuen,
 To stand in thare degre:
 The son to serue the day lyght,
 The moyne also to serue the nyght;
 The fourte day shall this be.
 (ll. 49-54)

Significantly the celestial bodies bring proportion to the universe with the planets in "there degre" and the sun and moon which "serve" day and night. All these details and images combine to reveal a creation that is orderly, one which God perceives as being "comely" (Chester l. 40) "good" (Towneley l. 22) and "in myrth and joy" (Ludus l. 31). Indeed in York, The Creation and the Fall of Lucifer, heaven is an example of His best work:

But onely þe worthely warke of my wyll
 In my sprete sall enspyre þe mighte of me,
 And in þe fyrste, faythely, my thoughts
 to full-fyll,
 Baynely in my blyssyng I byd at here be
 A blys al-beledande abowte me.
 (ll. 17-21)

Into this great scheme Lucifer at the beginning of each cycle has introduced confusion, dissension and disorder, a deed which results in his terrible banishment. Immediately

afterward are depicted the sins of Adam and Cain, both of whom are punished by banishment. In each case God deals angrily and vigorously with the evil-doer. A verse from each cycle shows that God's reaction to sin is consistent. Here, for example, is His denunciation of Satan and his followers:

Deus. Those foles for þaire fayre-hede in
fantasyes fell,
And hade mayne of mighte þat marked þam and
made þam
For-thi efter þaire warkes were, in wo sall
þai well,
For sum ar fallen into fylthe þat euermore
sall fade þam,
And neuer sall haue grace for to gyrth þam,
So passande of power tham thoght þam,
Thai wolde nocht me worschip þat wroghte
þam,
For-þi sall my wreth euer go with þam.
(York, The Creation and the Fall
of Lucifer, ll. 129-136)

His tone when dealing with Adam in the Ludus Coventriae is very similar:

Adam ffor þou þat appyl boot
A-rens my byddyng well I woot
Go teyl þi mete with swynk and swoot
in to þi lyvys ende
Goo nakyd vngry and bare ffoot
Ete both erbys gres and root
thy bale hath non other boot
as wrecch in werlde þou wende.
(ll. 325-332)

His treatment of Cain parallels the preceding punishment:

Cayne, cursed one earth thou shalt bee aye.
For thy deede thou haste donne todaye,

yearth warryed shalbe in thy worke aye
 that wickedly haste wrought.
 And for that thow haste donne this mischeyfe,
 to all men thou shalt bye unleeffe,
 idell and wandringe as an theyfe
 and overall sett at nought.

(Chester, The Drapers Playe,
 ll. 625-632)

In this overall context of disobedience and retribution, a pattern of wrathful vengeance has, therefore, been firmly established. Where the Noah plays themselves depart significantly from the biblical text is in their depiction of the emotional state of God. The Chester play, in keeping with its stricter attention to the biblical text, is closer to the mild Vulgate expression, "Poenituit eum quod hominem fecisset in terra", and its description of God, "tactus dolore cordis intrinsecus" (Genesis 6:6). The other plays, however, aware of the dramatic as well as the theological need to portray God consistently and to justify the terrible deluge, intensify God's anger. The sheer determination of God in the York play of the Shipwrights:

Bot for ther synnes þai shall be shente,
 And for-done hoyly, hyde and hewe.
 Of þam shall no more be mente,
 Bot wirke þis werke I will al newe.
 Al newe I will þis worlde be wroght,
 And waste away þat wonnys þer-in,
 A flowyd a-bove þame shall be broght,
 To stroye medilerthe, both more and myn,
 (ll. 21-28)

is surpassed in other plays by a strong emphasis on wrath

and God's overwhelming desire for vengeance. Consider the

Ludus Coventriae:

Synne so sore grevyht me ^{þa} in certayn
 I wol be vengyd of þis grett mysse

 I xal dystroye þis werd down ryght
 Here synne so sore grevyht me in syght
 þei xal no mercy haue,

(ll. 95-96, 102-104)

lines which make direct connections between grief, vengeance, destruction, and finally (possibly even heretically) a lack of mercy. Although short on grief the Newcastle fragment is emphatic about vengeance and destruction and even describes man as God's "foe", a word which in this context has a diabolical connotation:

Their Folk in Earth I made of Nought,
 Now are they fully my Foe.
 Vengeance now will I do
 Of them that have grieved me ill,
 Great Floods shall over them go,
 And run over Hoop and Hill.
 All Mankind dead shall be,
 With Storms both stiff and steer.

(Bourne's Text ll. 3-10)

The Towneley pageant, too, although it presents, as we shall see, a more balanced view of man's relationship with God, provides a vigorous account of His punitive intentions:

Veniance will I take,
 In erth for syn sake,
 My grame thus will I wake,
 both of grete and small.

(ll. 87-90)

In this, the various Noah plays mirror the attitude of God

to be found in another genre, poems which perhaps predate the cycles. The Middle English Genesis poem⁸ explains that "wreche" and "wrake" preceded the flood, and the poet of Cleanness attributes extreme anger to the Creator:

Pat þe wyȝe þat al wroȝt ful wroþly bygynneȝ.
 When he knew vche contre corupte in hit
 seluen,
 & vch freke forloyned fro þe ryȝt wayeȝ,
 Felle temptande tene towched his hert;
 As wyȝe, wo hym with-inne werþ to hym seluen:
 "Me for-þynkeȝ ful much þat euer I mon made,
 Bot I schal delyuer & do away þat doten on
 þis molde,
 & fleme out of þe folde al þat fleſch wereȝ,
 Fro þe burne to þe best, fro bryddeȝ to
 fyscheȝ;
 Al schal down & be ded & dryuen out of erþe,
 Pat euer I sette saule inne; & sore hit me
 Pat euer I made hem my self."⁹
 (ll. 280-291)

The kind of exegesis that leads to such a portrayal of God is typological in nature. As we have seen, the widespread sinfulness of man which leads to devastation is a variation of Adam's original sin. An understanding of this archetypal pattern provides a very reasonable basis for the extreme anger with which the playwrights portray God. As if not to be deprived of the emotional value to be gained from the theme of revenge, even the Chester Noah reverts to it later in the play after the flood is over. Indeed the word "vengeance" occurs five times between

line 298 and line 327. Although the positioning of this explanation for the flood is dramatically weak, the plays can now be seen to be totally consistent in attributing to God this very human impulse to bring to such a disastrous conclusion the First Age of Man.

Our study of the Noah plays thus far, therefore, shows that the various playwrights have attempted to adapt the basic biblical details of God's reaction to man's pre-flood sin into dramatic formats that explain the terrible destruction. But do the plays answer the question of why Noah is spared? Is the picture merely one of obedience or extreme punishment? One may explain that surviving middle-eastern documents from earliest times and from numerous cultures consistently show that peoples concerned accepted the all-powerful nature of their deities.¹⁰ The covenants depict very one-sided agreements indeed. Omnipotence and obedience are claimed by the deity and the people receive a measure of protection and good will, usually obscurely worded, in return. Certainly the Vulgate and the Noah plays which parallel it follow this ancient formula. Each version of the play begins with either a repetition of the creation in which God claims once again to have made the whole world, usually from nothing, or an invocation or prayer in which Noah acknowledges His great power. The Chester and Ludus Coventriae

versions are typical:

I, God, that all this world hath wrought,
 heaven and yearth, and all of nought,
 (Chester, 11.1-2)

and also:

God of his goodnesse . and of grace grounde
 By whoys gloryous power all thyng is wrought
 in whom all vertu plenteuously is ffounde
 with-owtyn whos wyl may be ryth nought.
 (Ludus Coventriae 11.1-4)

Furthermore, the Towneley play expresses the original covenant between God and man in temporal terms that plainly illustrate the imbalance in power and right:

I repente full sore/ that euer maide I man
 Bi me he settis no store/ and I am his
soferan;
 I will distroy therfor/ Both beest, man,
and woman,
 All shall perish les and mor.
 (11.91-94)

It is true that a medieval audience steeped in church doctrine and more accustomed in their own personal lives to the rigours of a contemporary master-man relationship¹¹ would readily accept the pre-flood events as the revealed truth, but these factors cannot minimize the real significance of the covenant as a manifestation of God's will and, more importantly, as an ordering force in the relationship between God and man. Are covenants and obedience, however, the stuff that leads to great drama? Rebellion may (witness that of Satan in Paradise Lost) but subservience, hardly. Herein may lie the fundamental weakness of mystery plays as drama: their commitment to religious stability

and their primary didactic purpose are serious hindrances to thematic innovation.

There are similar difficulties in the depiction of the central human figure. Although the character of Noah sometimes alters drastically in his relationship with his wife, the man chosen by God to lead a handful of survivors into the Second Age is uniform in his relationship with God as we see it in the various Noah plays. The Vulgate describes Noah as perfectus, and iustus twice, and cum deo ambulavit (Genesis 6:9), elusive terms indeed. Conventional church interpretation would suggest that Noah has successfully avoided sin, a concept which in turn fails to tell us anything concrete about the man.

Early poems also fail to indicate clearly why Noah of all men was chosen to be the source of regeneration for the human race. The poet of Cleanness follows the Bible closely:

Þenne in worlde watȝ a wyȝe wonyande on lyue,
 Ful reddy & ful ryȝtwys, & rewled hym fayre;
 In þe drede of dryȝtyn his dayeȝ he vseȝ,
 & ay glydande wyth his god his grace watȝ þe
 more.

(11.293-296)

Cursor Mundi is similarly elusive:

Alle hem but þi wif and þe
 þi sones & her wyues þre
 þe eizte for ȝoure leute
 Allone I haue graunted gre,¹²
 (Trinity, 11. 1653-1656)

and the Middle English Genesis¹³ omits Noah's qualifications altogether.

The descriptions of Noah in all four of the cycles, however, are quite uniform in presenting to a medieval audience the kind of man an irate God would spare. We have seen how the Wakefield playwright has designed a universe which serves God. It is significant that in each Noah version almost the first word in reference to him is "servante". Perhaps there is no other concept that approaches so nearly to the type that the medieval church considered worthy of salvation, but certainly the attitudes and responses to God's commands in the various plays show Noah to be the archetypal good servant. Not only is he humble before his master as we see him in prayer in the Towneley and Ludus Coventriae plays, but York describes him as "sad" and "cleyn", as though he sees his duty to God seriously and clearly before him. The Chester play and the Newcastle fragment proceed beyond the mere mannerisms of servants by describing Noah's service as "free", thus giving him a spiritual volition that is central to Christian teaching.

The York play perhaps comes closest to identifying precisely the characteristic of the good servant and of the good Christian that was uppermost in the medieval view:

Nooe, my seruand, sad an cleyn,
 For thou art stabill in stede and
 stalle,
 I wyll pou wyrke, with-owten weyn,
 A warke to saffe pi-selfe wyth-all.
 (11. 33-36)

Here God attributes His decision to save Noah to the quality of stability which this servant has shown (as does Chester after the flood, 1.271). Man must reflect within himself the kind of order which God originally ordained in Eden and which has been disrupted by original sin and latterly by the wilfulness of Noah's contemporaries. In contrast to them, each member of Noah's family in turn in the Ludus Coventriae prays that he will offer no offence to God. Stability is also illustrated by the speeches of gratitude which Noah makes to God in the York play:

A! lorde, I lowe þe lowde and still,
 Þat vn-to me, wretche vn-worthye,
 Þus with thy worde, as is þi will
 Lykis to appere þus propyrly,
 (York, 11. 41-44)

and in the Chester play:

A, lorde, I thanke thee lowde and still
 that to mee arte in such will
 and spares mee and my houshould to spill,
 as I nowe soothly fynde.
 Thy byddinge, lorde, I shall fulfill
 nor never more thee greeve ne gryll,
 that such grace hath sente mee tyll
 amonges all mankynde.
 (Chester, 11. 41-48)

Typically, the Towneley play achieves a greater dedication to God's will by combining obedience with adoration:

Bot yit will I cry/ for mercy and call;
 Noe thi seruant, am I/ lord ouer all!
 Therfor me and my fry/ shal with me fall;
 saue from velany/ and bryng to thi hall

In heuen;
 And kepe me from syn,
 This world within;
 Comly kyng of mankyn,
 I pray the here my stevyn!
 (ll. 64-72)

Here Noah pledges obedience by asking God's grace that he might avoid sin, while at the same time he acknowledges God's orderly scheme by proclaiming Him "Lord over all" and "Mankind's comely king".

That order is a major consideration in God's universal scheme becomes even further apparent when we examine the role of the family in the Noah plays. The behaviour of Noah's wife, which is unruly in three of the four cycles and in the Newcastle fragment, will be dealt with in the next chapter, but his three sons and daughters-in-law in all versions show a readiness to obey Noah which closely parallels his own readiness to obey God. Each in turn, hastens to assist in the construction of the ark in the Chester, Towneley, and Ludus Coventriae plays by bringing materials or by wielding tools. This task of building the ark is onerous; it is an appropriate measure of their willingness to serve God, not merely as worshippers but as active and dutiful servants. In the same vein, the specific details of ark-building given in God's instructions or the dialogue of the family in the

Chester, York, and Towneley plays, may be seen not merely as an opportunity for shipwrights to dedicate their skills to God. In addition, they indicate the stringent requirements that God imposes upon His servants, for the strict instructions concerning size, materials and interior design are accompanied by stern injunctions in Towneley (l. 92) and York (l. 86) that no mistakes are to be made.

The obedience shown in their readiness to build the ark takes on greater stature in the Chester play when the dutiful sons overwhelm the opposition to God's plan to save man by carrying their mother forcibly aboard the ark. (ll. 237-244). The comic element aside, the sons in this episode reject the disobedience of their mother and by bringing her on the ark enable God's instructions to be completely fulfilled. The Wakefield playwright, in fact, sees the obedience of the sons as being central to the survival of the human race. They even chastise their father, who has contributed to the family disorder and delayed the sailing of the ark:

Primus filius. A! whi fare ye thus?/
 ffader and moder both!
 Secundus filius. Ye shuld not be so spitus/
 standyng in sich a woth.
 Tercius filius. Thise ar so hidus/
 with many a cold coth.
 Noe. we will do as ye bid vs/ we will no
 more be wroth,
 Dere barnes!
 Now to the helme will I hent,
 And to my ship tent.
 (Wakefield, 11.415-421)

With Noah resuming his duties, the sons have preserved the order necessary to usher in the Second Age of Man. When we consider, as well, that it is they and their wives who will multiply and fill the earth, they are seen as the kinds of servants who can be entrusted with their master's estate.

So significant is the theme of the responsibilities of the good servant in the Noah plays, that we find in the Newcastle fragment the existence of an evil counterpart. It follows that if good servants are to be saved, then wicked ones will be destroyed. In this fascinating fragment, we find that Satan, called Deabolus, confirms God's description of the state of man. Amid great self-congratulation he claims earthly mastery and describes as his "Servants" every human being:

Put off Harro, and wele away,
 That ever I uprofe this Day;
 So may I smile and say
 I went, there has been none alive,
 Man, Beast, Child nor Wife,
 But my Servants were they.
 (Bourne's Text, ll. 95-100)

In this way the message (presented in type and anti-type) about stability and obedience, and the resulting salvation and destruction, becomes abundantly clear to the medieval audience. Serve God and be saved; serve Satan and die.

Against such a stark religious message, we find within each play elements which are designed to moderate

the ponderous theological tone. Drama continues to be a genre that allows much improvisation by author, director and actor. If Absolon, the clerk, may hope to win Alison, the carpenter's wife, by means of his acting ability in a mystery play,¹⁴ the playwrights themselves through their writing skills may hope to achieve greater verisimilitude through character development within the script. No liberties may be taken with the character of God, naturally, but something may be done with Noah. He must remain humble before God, of course; in fact Manuscript H of the Chester play shows Noah selecting the dove to find land because of its meekness (Chester, Appendix IA, l. 15), an obvious attempt by the playwright to reinforce Noah's basic temperament and to identify once more the quality necessary for salvation.

Three of the cycles, in particular, give this character features that appear to take him abruptly out of the ever subservient role that he plays in Chester. In York, Towneley, and the Ludus Coventriae, Noah is quick to point out certain weaknesses in God's plan concerning the ark. In York, he claims he is too old (ll. 50-52); in the Ludus, his legs are too weak (l. 129); and though he begins the work readily enough in the Towneley play, setting the mast almost breaks his back (l. 264). The Newcastle fragment similarly adds the complaint (ll. 79-82)

that he lacks the necessary construction skills. These widespread innovations are not, however, mere attempts to liven up a cast of flat characters. Noah's complaints are directly related to the theme of obedience. As well as providing a welcome comic element, these incidents prove that God's grace extends even to the weak and hesitant. Noah, a man, may doubt his own ability to fulfil God's will, but God, recognizing his essential obedient nature, will not only assist him:

Deus. Be-gynne my werke behoves þe nede,
 And þou wyll passe from peynes smerte,
 I sall þe sokoure and the spede,
 And giffe þe hele in hede and hert,
 (York, ll. 53-56)

but will raise him to new levels of achievement:

This is a nobull gyn,
 Thise nayles so thay ryn,
 Thoro more and myn,
 Thise bordis ichon;

wyndow and doore/ euen as he saide,
 Thre ches chambre/ thay ar well maide,
 Pyk & tar full sure/ ther apon laide,
 This will euer endure/ therof am I paide;
 ffor why?

It is better wroght
 Then I coude haif thoght;
 hym that maide all of noght
 I thank oonly.

(Towneley, ll. 276-288)

God's will, the Hound of Heaven, cannot brook dissent even from the readiest of servants.

This reluctance of Noah prefigures that of Joseph. It is important to note here that Joseph's misgivings

about Mary in York, Towneley, and the Ludus are very similar to those of Noah. Both men complain that old age may be a hindrance to their situation, and both suffer either physically or mentally in fulfilling God's purposes. The Towneley Joseph is particularly pathetic:

Then sayde thay all to me,

"If thou be old meruell not the,
ffor god of heuen thus ordans he,
Thi wand shewys openly;
It florishes so, withouten nay,
That the behovys wed mary the may;"
A sory man then was I;

I was full sory in my thoght,
I sayde for old I myght nocht
hir haue neuer the wheder;
I was vnlykely to hir so yong,
Thay sayde ther helpyd none excusyng,
And wed vs thus togeder.
(ll. 256-268)

Typologically, therefore, it seems reasonable to observe that the two men have parallel functions in these dramatic messages. In obedience to God, a perplexed Noah will build the vessel that preserves the human race, while Joseph, similarly perplexed, will provide the family context into which the saviour of the human race will be born.

In all of the plays, Noah perceives the sparing of him and his family as a form of God's grace which he gratefully, if hesitantly, receives. This grace is, in fact, a manifestation of God's love and cannot become operative unless the conditions of obedience and order

have been previously established. The York play expresses most economically the interdependence of love, duty, mercy, and grace:

Noe. A! lorde, to þe I love and lowte,
 The catteraks I trowe be knytte,
 Beholde, my sonnes al three,
 Þe clowdes are waxen clere.
 2 filius. A! lorde of mercy free,
 Ay louyd myght þou be.
 Noe. I sall assaye þe see,
 Hoe depe þat it is here.
 Vxor. Loved be that lord þat giffes all
 grace,
 Þat kyndly þus oure care wolde kele.
 (ll. 189-198)

The language as we see here and, indeed, in all the Noah plays continues to be at odds with the situation. The dialogue which contains numerous references to love and grace simply fails to ring true against the backdrop of widespread death and destruction. The Chester playwright struggles to present a loving God after the flood:

My blessinge nowe I give thee here,
 to thee, Noe, my servante deare,
 for vengeance shall noe more appeare.
 And now farewell, my darlinge dere,
 (ll. 325-328)

but the transition is too abrupt, too brief, and too late.

If we are to understand the real function of the Noah plays within their cycles, we must consider them in the broader context of God's plan for the salvation of man. It is possible for man to avoid a terrible death brought about by God's vengeance if he remains obedient to God's will, but the escape from physical death pales

before the promise of eternal spiritual salvation in a heaven which the Towneley Noah anticipates (l. 553). In the birth of Christ and the subsequent Passion sequences we have the central motifs of the cycles, but in their portrayal of Christ's sacrifice these scenes also provide the archetypal example of obedience to the divine plan. It is clear, therefore, that the various Noah playwrights perceived their plays not as single episodes in biblical history but as events which in a unified and coherent way dramatize man's relationship with God from the Creation to the Crucifixion. Moreover, if the promise of grace possesses great appeal for the viewers of these plays, it is dramatically sound as well as theologically desirable to identify those forces which threaten man and to stress the danger which they present. In this the Noah playwrights, as we shall see, achieve striking success.

Notes for Chapter One

¹This and succeeding references are to The Chester Mystery Cycle. ed. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills. E.E.T.S. S.S., 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). As with the other editions of the plays, line numbers are included in the body of the text.

²This and succeeding references are to York Plays. ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885).

³This and succeeding references are to The Towneley Plays. ed. George England. E.E.T.S. E.S., 71 (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus Reprint Co., 1975).

⁴This and succeeding references are to Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi. ed. K.S. Block. E.E.T.S. E.S., 120 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁵Mirk's Festial. ed. T. Erbe. E.E.T.S. E.S., 96 (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), p.72.

⁶Since the reference occurs in both Chester and Ludus Coventriae also, it is not clear why Gardner states "that the Trinity is not ordinarily mentioned in other Noah pageants". See John Gardner, The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p.40.

⁷V.A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1966), p.147.

⁸The Story of Genesis and Exodus. ed. R. Morris. E.E.T.S. O.S., 7 (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), p.16, l. 552.

⁹Early English Alliterative Poems. ed. R. Morris. E.E.T.S. O.S., 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.45.

¹⁰Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1959), pp.55-57.

¹¹Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p.7.

¹²Cursor Mundi. ed. Richard Morris. E.E.T.S. O.S., 57 (London: Oxford University Press, 1874).

¹³Genesis and Exodus. R. Morris.

¹⁴The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer (vol. 1). ed. Thomas Tyrwhitt (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1860), p.105.

CHAPTER TWO

ELEMENTS OF DISORDER

Although God in all versions of the Noah play takes vengeance against a creation steeped in sin, it is not a vengeance designed to eliminate the sources of disorder completely. The plays are consistent with orthodox teaching in indicating that even after the great flood the opportunities for disobedience will continue:

Nequaquam ultra maledicam terrae propter
homines: sensus enim et cogitatio humani
cordis in malum prona sunt ab adolescentia
sua.

(Genesis 8: 21)

Chester, as usual, remains close to the Vulgate:

Warrye yearth I will noe more
for mans sinnes that greeves mee sore;
for of youth man full yore
hasse bynne enclyned to sinne.
(ll. 273-276)

There exists in fallen man, and the survivors of the flood still have a fallen nature, the persistent tendency to disrupt the divine order by disobeying God's will. In addition to man's innate destructive impulse, the Noah plays reveal other elements which are poised to draw man into the kind of error committed by his predecessors. Like Adam, Noah is matched with a female companion who

seems ever ready to lead her spouse into disobedience. Moreover, in several of the plays there is established a clear connection between Noah's wife and Satan who lurks offstage to disrupt God's plan for a new order. Still further, there are clear suggestions that although the ark may be the means by which the obedient are saved, it bears along with them elements which oppose God's will.

We have seen in the preceding chapter how Noah, however dedicated in his service to God, is portrayed by the playwrights as a man with some doubts about the task which he has been given. Far more serious a threat to God's plan, however, is Noah's failure to establish order within his own family. His meekness in his relationship with God is entirely appropriate, but his lack of control over his wife brings the whole family close to destruction. The blows which are struck in Chester, York, and Towneley provide low comedy in the plays, but in permitting his wife to detain the ark, Noah tolerates insubordination to God. In essence, he is duplicating the sin of Adam whose failure to master Eve led to God's first vengeance against man. The York play captures convincingly Noah's increasing concern that the situation is no longer under his control:

O! woman arte pou woode?
 Of my werkis pou not wotte,
 All þat has ban or bloode

Salle be ouere flowed with pe floode.
(11. 93-96)

Noah even requires physical assistance:

Helpe! my sonnes to holde her here,
For tille her harmes she takes no heede.
(11. 101-102)

The seriousness of their plight becomes clear when he explains the significance of his wife's interference, "Pou spilles vs alle, ille myght pou speede!" (1. 106)

The disorder which Noah has allowed to enter into his relationship with his wife is established very early in the Towneley play, even before God has left the stage:

Noe. lord, homward will I hast/ as fast as
that I may;
My (wife) will I frast/ what she will say,
(Exit Deus)
And I am agast/ that we get som fray
Betwixt vs both;
ffor she is full tethee,
ffor litill oft angre,
If any thyng wrang be,
Soyne is she wroth.
(11. 343-351)

In this cycle, Noah's contribution to disorder is even more pronounced. The chaos in the universe which he observes:

Behold to the heuen/ the cateractes all,
That are open full euen/ grete and small.
And the planettis seuen/ left has thare stall,
This thoners and levyn/ downe gar fall
ffull stout,
Both halles and bowers,
Castels and towres;
ffull sharp ar thise showers,
that renys aboute,
(11. 343-351)

has been matched by the violence which Noah himself initiates on two occasions:

Noe. We! hold thi tong, ram-skyt/ or I shall the stille.
 Vxor. By my thryft, if thou smyte/ I shall turne the vntill.
 Noe. We shall assay as tyte/ haue at the, gill!
 Apon the bone shal it byte./
 Vxor. A, so, mary! thou smytis ill!
 Bot I suppose
 I shal not in thi det,
 fflyt of this flett!
 Take the ther a langett
 To tye vp thi hose,
 (11. 217-225)

and, as we see later:

Noe. In fayth, and for youre long taryyng
 Ye shal lik on the whyp.
 Vxor. Spare me not, I pray the/ bot euen as thou thynk,
 These grete wordis shall not flay me./
 Noe. Abide, dame, and drynk ffor betyn shall thou be/ with this staf to thou stynk;
 Ar strokis good? say me./
 Vxor. what say ye, wat wynk?
 Noe. speke!
 Cry me mercy, I say!
 Vxor. Therto say I nay.
 Noe. Bot thou do, bi this day,
 Thi hede shall I breke.
 (11. 377-387)

One may not argue that the violence is a means of re-establishing order. When the parents enter the ark peacefully after the second fight, Noah pleads guilty to the sin of anger and to his son's remonstrances that their recent violence has kept him from his duty:

Primus filius. A! whi fare ye thus?/ ffader
 and moder both!
 Secundus filius. Ye shuld not be so spitus/
 standyng in sich woth.
 Tercius filius. Thise ar so hidus/ with many
 a cold coth.
 Noe. we will do as ye bid vs/ we will no
 more be wroth,
 Dere barnes!

(11. 415-419)

Noah, then, whether as a mere victim of his wife's disobedience as in Chester (l. 246) or as a servant weak enough to be distracted from his responsibilities as in York and Towneley, presents at the beginning of the Second Age a human nature which will remain subject to all of the potentials of sin.

Another significant source of disorder to be found on the ark is the raven. As God destroyed all of the human race except Noah and his family, He also destroyed a natural world tainted by general sinfulness:

Cumque vidisset Deus terram esse corruptam
(omnis quippe caro corruperat viam suam
super terram), dixit ad Noe: Finis universae
carnis venit coram me: repleta est terra
iniquitate a facie eorum, et ego disperdam
eos cum terra.

(Vulgate, Genesis 6: 12-13)

It follows, therefore, that if man's fallen nature lingers on in Noah and the others aboard the ark, vestiges of corruption remain among the animal survivors as well. Of the raven the Vulgate states merely:

...Noe...dimisit corvum qui egrediebatur,
et non revertebatur, donec siccaentur
aquae super terram,

(Genesis 8: 6-7)

a description which may imply only a lack of cooperation. On the other hand, John Mirk in his Festial (p. 73) and the poets of Cleanness (ll. 455-468) and Cursor Mundi attribute the failure of the raven to return to his discovery of carrion and his subsequent dereliction of duty:

His wyndowe opened þo noe
 And lete a rauē out fle
 He souȝte vp & doun þere
 A stud to sitte vp on sum where
 Vpon þe watir þere he fond
 A drenched beest þere fletond
 Of þat flesshe was he so fayn
 To shippe coom he not aȝayn
 þerefore þe messangere þei sey
 þat dwelleþ longe in his Iourney
 He may be calde wiþ resoun clere
 Oon of þe rauēnes messangere
 And whenne noe perceyued was
 Of þe rauēnes deceit in plas
 He lete out a doufe.....

(Trinity Text ll. 1881-1895)¹

The Chester playwright is the only one not to follow this kind of exegesis. For him the raven fulfils its purpose, yet another example of the Chester penchant for purpose and stability:

Now 40 dayes are fullie gone.
 Send a raven I will anone,
 if ought-where earth, tree, or stone
 be drye in any place.
 And if this foule come not againe,
 it is a signe, soth to sayne,
 that drye it is on hill or playne,
 and God hath done some grace.

(Appendix IA, ll. 1-8)

The playwrights of Towneley and Ludus, however, see malice in the bird's actions. By feasting upon carrion and

ignoring the needs of the ark, the raven is also breaking one of the commandments in the new covenant which God gives to Noah, "Excepto, quod carnem cum sanguine non comedetis." (Vulgate, Genesis 9: 4) It is a commandment which the Chester play explains:

Theras yee have eaten before
trees and rootes since yee weare bore,
of cleane beastes nowe, lesse and more,
I give you leave to eate --
save blood and fleshe bothe in feare
of wrauge dead carryen that is here.
Eate yee not of that in noe manere,
for that aye yee shall leave.
(ll. 285-292)

In this wilful digression the raven parallels man's original sin and indicates that the Second Age of Man, like the First, will be characterized by disobedience to the divine will.

The York treatment of the raven episode is similar. The "faithfull" dove (l. 239) is linked to Noah etymologically through the concept of bringing comfort (l. 32 and l. 238), and both contrast with the raven as variations of the good servant. Moreover, the "fayland frende" (l. 228) is connected not with carrion this time but with gluttony, a sin that recalls the eating imagery of the original disobedience in Eden. When we examine also God's denunciation of the Serpent in Man's Disobedience and Fall from Eden, the fifth play in the cycle:

Al wikkid worme, woo worthe þe ay,
For þou on þis maner

hast made þam swilke affraye;
 My malysonne haue þou here,
 with all þe myght y may.
 And on thy wombe þan shall þou glyde,
 And be ay full of enmyte
 To al man kynde on ilke a side,
 And erthe it shalle thy sustynauce be
 to ete & drynke,
 (ll. 150-159)

we see that Noah's curse against the raven obviously associates that bird with man's mortal enemy:

Nowe sonne, and yf he so forthe gange,
 Sen he for all oure welthe gon wende,
 Then be he for his werkis wrange
 Euermore weried with-owten ende.
 (ll. 229-232)

If the theme of obedience versus disobedience is central to the Noah plays, then the forces of disobedience must not be given short shrift thematically or dramatically. With the introduction of Noah's wife and family, we have in the Chester play, as in most of the other cycles, the inclusion of a highly comic sequence. The playwright seems suddenly to become aware that his play must do more than merely reinforce the simple faith of the people. He, therefore, attempts to involve the audience personally in the Noah story. For a modern audience there may well be difficulty in perceiving a consistency in the behaviour of one of the most important characters in these plays, namely, Noah's wife. We must remind ourselves, however, that a medieval audience with a more unified view of the universe could move back and forth readily between

sacred and profane levels of interpretation. The wife is at the same time a figure in a religious context and a type that each of us must deal with from time to time. The shrew, a stock figure to be found in even our latest writings, is a character whom the medieval crowds could readily recognize. Everyone knows her kind, and the contrariness, stubbornness, and willingness to strike out physically that are seen in these pageants enable the audience to accept her readily. Her reasons for refusing to board the ark are typically shrewish: she cannot see the reason for it (Chester, l. 103), she will not be separated from her friends (Chester, ll. 201-202 and York, ll. 143-144), she must gad about in town (York, l. 81), her husband never tells her anything (York, ll. 113-116), or he is always wasting time (Towneley, ll. 191-198). York, particularly, expresses her indifference to Noah's problems and her readiness to blame him:

Now Noye, in faythe þe fonnes full faste,
 This fare wille I no lenger frayne,
 Þou arte nere woode, I am agaste,
 Fare-wele, I wille go home agayne.

 Noye, þou myght haue leteyn me wete,
 Erly and late þou wente þer outte,
 And ay at home þou lete me sytte,
 To loke þat nowhere were wele aboutte.
 (ll. 89-92, 113-116)

Ultimately the disorder of their relationship leads to a physical confrontation. The wife's zest for violence and noise may derive from the folk drama of the

mummers, and it may survive through interludes like Heywood's Johan Johan Tyb his Wife and Sir Johan the Priest or Tom Tiler and his Wife, to the Punch and Judy shows which are performed right up to the present. Indeed, for many in the audience, the wife's detention on the ark (York, l. 96), her acquiescence after a beating (Towneley, l. 414), or the forceful carrying of her aboard (Chester, ll. 1243-1244) must have been the highlight of the play. The scene has its recently modern counterpart. In the television programme, The Beverley Hillbillies, Granny, now rich, refuses to leave the hills of Tennessee, and in the weekly prologue viewers could see her family forced to carry her, rocking-chair and all, out to the truck which will take them to California. In the twentieth century, mechanized arks will bear the lucky ones to a new kind of promised land. Granny, too, is ever willing to thrash those who question her resolve. This type of figure in all of the Noah versions provides welcome comedy and perhaps reinforces the religious teaching that salvation is available for even the most ordinary and reluctant of human beings.

Non-religious literature contemporary with the cycles shows that the shrewishness of the female was a popular secular subject in the Middle Ages. This is how Andreas Capellanus concludes the Art of Courtly Love which

was known to at least most of the literate in medieval England:

Furthermore, not only is every woman by nature a miser, but she is also envious and a slanderer of other women, greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant, fickle in her speech, disobedient and impatient of restraint, spotted with the sin of pride and desirous of vain glory, a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets, too much given to wantonness, prone to every evil², and never loving any man in her heart.

And here is married life described in the De conjugio non ducenda, a poem widely copied in manuscripts continuously from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century and translated into English by Lydgate:

For every wife is quick-tempered,
deceitful, jealous, and never humble;
a married man is similar to an ass
which is always ready to receive burdens. ³

Chaucer also provides an exceptional type of Noah's wife in the figure of the Wife of Bath. She admits to deceit, like the Chester Noah's wife is given to strong drink (l. 5776),⁴ and like the wife in the Towneley pageant is associated with spinning (l. 5983). More significantly she confesses to gadding about (ll. 6221-3) and resents the sermons which the clergy frequently deliver against her type (ll. 6271-8). To a medieval audience then, the type is well known and could be appreciated both in traditional and comic-realistic terms.

It is obvious that a good defence against

contemporary shrewishness is to relate unruly wifely behaviour to those female biblical figures whose deportment has led to man's suffering. Disobedience to the husband, if it can be shown to have a biblical parallel, may well provide an object lesson for wilful housewives.

An Alphabet of Tales contains an account which establishes what, from a husband's point of view, must be an important connection:

Cesarius tellis how som tyme þerfor þer was a knyght þat had a wurthi gentyll-womman vnto his wyfe, and a gude, whilk þat had a grete skorn & a hethyng agayns (Eve), þat sho sulde be so vnobedient vnto Adam hur husband. And þis knyght blamyd his wyfe herefor and said þat sho was inobediente vnto hym in les þing þan evur was Eve vnto Adam. And sho sayd nay, & he yis. So he chargid hur in payn of xl mark þat opon þat day at sho schulde be wasshid or bathid, at sho sulde not entre in-to þe cowrte nor into þe dyke barefute. And lo! so mervaloslie it happend; ffor fro thens furth sho was so turment with temptacion þat on a tyme when sho was bathid, sodanlie sho sterte oute of hur bathe & went barefute in-to þe cowrte & in-to þe dyke vp to þe kneis. And one at saw hur come & tellid his lord, & he come vnto þe ladie & teld hur þat sho had broken hur obediens in les þing þan Eve did, & þer he blamyd hur gretelie & made hur pay hur money at, he had putt hur in payn of evurilk dele. ⁵

This clearly reinforces the notion that the nature of woman continues to be disorderly, and that, however worthy they may be as wives, their inherent lack of discipline is a constant threat to the order of things. Women, moreover,

are even a danger to men who are not their husbands and may be most dedicated to God's service. John Mirk gives good advice to parish priests:

Wymmenes serues thow moste forsake,
 Of euele fame leste they the make,
 For wymmenes speche that ben schrewes,
 Turne ofte a-way gode thewes,⁶

advice which, as Absolon in "The Miller's Tale" illustrates, was not always followed. If Noah can be seen as a kind of priest, a concept to be developed later in this thesis, the wife becomes a threat to the overall stability of the church.

Noah's wife appears, therefore, as a type whose violence (she even offers to assault her offspring over this business of the ark, Towneley, ll. 323-324) and disobedience were recognized as serious disruptions on the familial and social levels of medieval life. A marital relationship, according to orthodox teaching, is a sacrament ordained by God and ideally will reflect the balance, proportion, and harmony of a universe which He has designed. Mrs. Noah is obviously at odds with that design.

If the Noah plays do have genuine religious significance, then a role as dominant as that which Noah's wife is given must be evaluated in religious, not merely secular, terms. She assumes far greater dimension than is immediately apparent as we examine some of the plentiful precedents in religious literature which warn against her

type. Numerous sources, ancient and medieval, agree on the stubborn, disobedient and unreasonable nature of the human female. The Bible itself provides examples. Owst sees Noah's wife as being the offspring of a passage in the Vulgate Book of Proverbs and claims that "her immediate foster parent is the native pulpit" for "she is the typical shrew of the medieval sermon".⁷ The passage he refers to is as follows:

Garrula et vaga,
Quietis impatiens,
Nec valens in domo consistere pedibus
suis;
Nunc foris, nunc in plateis,
Nunc iuxta angulos insidians.
 (Proverbia vii, 10-12)

One preacher, citing Jeremiah v, 26 as the basis for his sermon, writes:

"Those that lay wait as fowlers and hunters", says the former, "are the demons; their shares, decoys and traps are wicked and foolish women, who in their pomps and wiles catch men and deceive them." And again -- "This is manifest among those foolish women: for, women while they are chaste and virgin are marvellously modest; but, after they have begun to sin and are foolish, they fear no shame or derision."⁸

The English author of the thirteenth-century Speculum Laicorum begins with a strong secular condemnation:

There are two kinds of dogs, for some are well-bred, others low-bred. The well-bred, indeed, are silent and free from guile; the low-bred are ill-tempered and fond of barking. So it is with women: the daughters of nobles are artless, silent

and lovers of solitude; the ignoble to be
sure are loud and roamers of the streets,⁹

but the same author discovers a diabolical association in their behaviour in church, when he describes women as being wont to "rowne togedyr" during sermon-time, while "the fende sate on hor schuldrys, wrytyng on a long roll als fast as he myght".¹⁰ Woodburn Ross refers to a sermon which even attempts to redeem this very negative attitude toward women:

Women ought not to be despised, for though a woman destroyed mankind it must be remembered that a woman bore the Redeemer."¹¹

It is not surprising, then, that with biblical texts and sermons such as these, there is contemporary iconographical material of the same theme. As early as the Junius Manuscript (c. 1000 A.D.) we find a picture of the reluctant wife refusing to ascend the stairs into the ark.¹² Anderson describes the boss in the nave of Norwich Cathedral showing Noah's son pleading with his "rigid looking" mother, and the disagreement is further perpetuated in stained glass windows at York Minster and Malvern Priory.¹³ The first window shows the wife with her hand stiffly raised to cut off her husband's entreaties. The second portrays Noah praying aside while his son continues to reason with his mother.

We see, therefore, that a whole range of religious genres illustrate an event for which there is no biblical

precedent. It does not really matter in this context whether, as Anderson says, the plays inspired the iconography or, a more likely situation, that both plays and iconography are the result of a long tradition of anti-feminine tirades from the pulpit. What is significant is that a number of very undesirable qualities which are held to be contemporary and peculiarly female are attributed to Noah's wife in a dramatic presentation designed to reveal the struggle which must be repeatedly and continuously fought if man is to obey God's commands.

The greatest significance of Noah's wife in all of the versions except the Ludus is, of course, that she exacerbates the continuing disharmony which has developed in the relationship between God and man. In failing to assist her husband to observe God's instructions, Noah's wife not only reenacts the sin which drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, but provides proof that resistance to God's demand for obedience and order will survive even the great flood.

Essentially the disobedience of Noah's wife in each play focuses on three concepts: her similarity to Eve, her identification as an agent of Satan, and her actions which prefigure opposition to God's will later in the cycles. In Chester, Towneley (only in passing, ll. 197-198), and Newcastle, her refusal to obey is connected like

Eve's to worldly appetites, with Chester emphasizing the connection to the point of gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins:

The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste,
 one everye syde that spredeth full farre.
 For fere of drowninge I am agaste;
 good gossippe, lett us drawe nere.

And lett us drinke or wee departe,
 for oftetyms wee have done soe.
 For at one draught thou drinke a quarte,
 and soe will I doe or I goe.

Here is a pottell full of malnesaye good
 and stronge;
 yt will rejoyse both harte and tonge.
 Though Noe thinke us never soe longe,
 yett wee wyll drinke atyte.

(The Good Gossips, ll. 225-236)

If the song of the good gossips is presented cacophonically, the relationship between Noah's wife and the forces of disorder is even clearer. Though the item to be consumed differs from that in the Adam play, like the biblical apple it distracts man, can transform his nature, and is one that for many has irresistible appeal.

Also in Chester we discover a fascinating interpretation that links the female nature of Noah's wife and Eve to the serpent itself. Eve, in attempting to excuse herself by blaming the serpent, identifies it as female:

This edder, lorde, shee was my foe
 and sothly mee disceaved alsoe,
 and made mee to eate that meate.
 (Adam, ll. 294-296).

This is in keeping with the Demon's description in the

Adam play of the form he will take to deceive Eve:

A maner of an edder is in this place
 that wynges like a bryde shee hase --
 feete as an edder, a maydens face --
 hir kynde I will take,
 (ll. 193-196)

and the subsequent stage direction:

Supremus volucris, penna serpens,
pede forma, forma puella.
 (after l. 208)

Women, as the Demon observes, are "full licourouse" (l. 199), and are, therefore, easy agents to recruit. Noah, moreover, perceives his wife as giving him enough opposition for twenty devils, "Come in, wiffe, in twentye devylls waye" (l. 219). Thus, in a pattern that reaches across the cycle we observe that Satan, the archetype of disorder, has devised through his manipulation of women a consistent technique to disrupt God's plans. In this connection, it is significant that in York and the Ludus Satan, in an attempt to prevent the harrowing of Hell, tries to influence not Pilote but his wife.

The York play establishes the diabolical connection very directly. References to Eve do not occur, but Noah's wife emulates Lucifer by arguing that Noah should respond to her will, not God's:

Noe. I pray þe, dame be stille.
 Thus god wolde haue it wrought.
 Vxor. Thou shulde haue witte my wille.
 (ll. 121-123)

The intransigence of women, therefore, may make them susceptible to wicked influence, but it can also be identified as the very essence of evil itself.

The Towneley playwright typically provides a much fuller association between Gill, the wife of Noah, and Eve. Not only is she described as the "begynnar of blunder" (l. 406), but her insistence on spinning instead of obeying her husband and God immediately connects her to the fallen Eve who, while Adam "delved", traditionally passed time by spinning. On another, pagan, level, Gill might be seen to be opposing God by indulging in witchcraft. The constant turning of the wheel and the deliberate, repetitive push of the foot on the treadle suggest hypnosis or the casting of spells. When she does this (l. 238), particularly while refusing to board the ark as the water rises (l. 338), her alliance with evil is fully realized. Initially she had been quick to criticize the meekness of her husband, the very quality which led God to save Noah from the deluge:

Noe. Wife, we ar hard sted/ with tythyngis
new.
Vxor. Bot thou were worthi be cled/ In
stafford blew;
ffor thou art alway adred/ be it fals or trew.
(ll. 199-201)

Later she is so far from understanding God's purpose that she cannot determine the practical functioning of what must have been a fairly simple vessel:

I was neuer bard ere/ As euer myght I the,
 In sich an oostre as this.
 In fath I can not fynd
 which is befor, which is behynd.
 (ll. 328-331)

The third daughter-in-law has suggested that her mother-in-law's spinning may continue on the ark, an indication that physical rescue will not change her nature (l. 361), and, though she assists in sailing the vessel, her complaints continue. The voyage is distressing:

Noe. Wife, tent the stere-tre/ and I
 shall assay
 The depnes of the see/ that we bere, if
 I may.
 Vxor. That shall I do ful wysly/ now go
 thi way,
 ffor apou this flood haue we/ flett many
 day,
 with pyne,
 (ll. 433-437)

her husband is ineffectual, "Now long shall thou hufe/ lay in thy lyne there" (l. 461), and she wonders where they are:

Bot, husband,
 What grownd may this be?
 (ll. 464-465)

She remains dissatisfied even after the ark has landed:

 here haue we beyn/ noy long enogh,
 with tray and with teyn/ and dreed mekill
 wogh.
 (ll. 532-533)

Rosemary Woolf's contention that Noah's wife reveals a subdued and obedient nature upon boarding the ark¹⁴ and that she, therefore, represents the repentent sinner may

be disputed. It is Gill, moreover, who suggested (l. 479) that Noah send out the raven, and that failure delayed the beginning of the Second Age. On several counts, therefore, the wife of the Towneley Noah is a powerful force for disorder; she clearly shows that opposition to God's will continues to operate in the world and that man, if he is to be the good servant, must contend with the opposition in whatever form it takes.

The parallellism between Noah's wife and Eve is most obvious in the Newcastle fragment.¹⁵ The pattern established in Eden is duplicated as Satan tempts Noah's wife to obtain knowledge by means of a secret, powerful draught. The man-wife confrontation begins, however, after the playwright has juxtaposed the attitudes of God and Satan toward the disorder that has come into the world. Men have become God's foes (l. 4) and the servants of Diabolus (l. 100). The respective agents are then approached, identification is given or withheld, and man and wife assume their tasks. The approach of this playwright is a good example of how a medieval audience could be trusted to see the implications of the drama and to understand its typology. Noah is, of course, the discoverer of wine, and the consequent abuse of this knowledge leads to the banishment of one of his sons. The actions of his wife, like those of the wives in the other

Noah plays are readily recognized as part of a monumental and firmly-established religious message.

As we have seen, the ultimate boarding of the ark by the wife in each of the Noah plays is no guarantee that evil has been eradicated or that the Second Age of Man will be characterized by obedience and holiness. Noah's wife may content herself with one final blow at her husband when she ascends into the Chester ark (l. 1246), but the other cycles contain more sophisticated and more significant forms of rebellion. In the York play in two separate places she longs, to her husband's dismay, for her lost friends, once she has boarded the ark:

My frendis þat I fra yoode
Are ouere flowen with floode,
(ll. 151-152)

and:

But Noye, where are nowe all oure kynne,
And companye we kn(e)we be-fore.
(ll. 269-270)

In another context, these sentiments might seem humane and laudable, but here, after God Himself has condemned these sinners, her plaint may be seen as a rejection of His will. Her anxieties, in fact, remind us of Lot's wife, who looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah.

This inability to understand fully the requirements of God continues to characterize female figures, including even that of Mary. Both Mary and Noah have been

selected as instruments of God's will because of their meekness, and Mary's devotion to Jesus is unquestioned. During the crucifixion scenes in each cycle, for example, her agony is very effective. Not only does she wish to join her son in death in each play (in Chester her heart, to illustrate the Trinity, threatens to break in three, l. 333), but in Chester she even offers to replace Him on the cross:

Alas, theeves, why doe ye soe?
 Slaves ye mee and lett my sonne goe.
 For him suffer I would this woe
 and lett him wend awaye.

(Passion, ll. 261-264)

The mother of Jesus is, however, a woman, and, since this is so, the playwrights consistently see her as unable to comprehend God's plan. In her grief she questions the need for Christ's suffering, a question which is answered by Christ or by John, a faithful male servant, as in the Noah plays. York's presentation in this regard is typical, perhaps more emphatic, in that she fails to understand even after Christ has explained:

Jesus. Pou woman, do way of thy wepyng,
 For me may pou no thyng amende,
 My fadirs wille to be wirkyng,
 For mankynde my body I bende.
 Ma. Allas! pat pou likes nocht to lende,
 Howe schulde I but wepe for thy woo!
 To care nowe my comforte is kende,
 Allas! why schulde we twynne þus in twoo
 For euere?

(Mortificacio Cristi, ll. 144-152)

The disorder of the various Noah plays is most significant in the ways in which it anticipates the corresponding Passion sequences. Much of the violence of the Passion has, of course, a scriptural origin, but the Noah playwrights through their imagery clearly reveal their understanding that their plays are an important bridge between Adam's fall and man's redemption. In every cycle, figures such as Lucifer, Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate attempt either to establish an order of their own or to preserve one which they believe Christ threatens. Caiaphas fears loss of position in the Chester conspiracy play:

Lordinges, lookers of the lawe,
 herkyns hether to my sawe.
 To Jesu all men can drawe
 and likinge in him hase.
 If we letten him longe gone,
 all men will leeve him upon;
 so shall the Romanes come anon
 and pryve us of our place.
 (ll. 305-312)

The dignity of God achieved in all of the Noah plays is parodied in the York Trial before Herod:

Rex. Pes, ye brothellis and browlys, in
 And frekis } pis broydenesse in brased,
 freykennesse to frayne,
 Youre tounge fro tretimng of truffillis
 be trased,
 Or pis brande } pat is bright schall breste
 in youre brayne,
 (ll. 1-4)

and in the Towneley Crucifixion:

PEasse I byd euereich Wight!
 Stand as styll as stone in Wall,
 Whyls ye ar present in my sight,
 That none of you clatter ne call;
 ffor if ye do, youre dede is dight,
 I warne it you both greatt and small,
 With this brand burnyshyd so bright,
 Therfor in peasse loke ye be all,
 (ll. 1-8)

speeches which contain the irony of a call for peace followed immediately by the threat of terrible violence. The titles and purposes of Satan revealed in the Ludus show that divine order described in the Noah plays has its evil counterpart, a diabolical scheme to cheat man of salvation:

I am your lord lucifer pat out of helle
 cam
 Prince of pis werd . and gret duke of
 helle
 Wherefore my name is clepyd sere satan
 Whech Aperyth among you . A matere to
 spelle.

I am Norsshire of synne . to be confusyon
 of man
 To bryng hym to my dongeon . per in fyre
 to dwelle
 Ho so evyr serve me so reward hym I kan
 pat he xal syng wellaway . ever in
 peynes ffelle.
 (ll. 1-8)

These figures who oppose Christ are, moreover, the spiritual accomplices of Noah's wife, who in three of the cycles almost ruins God's plan to save the human race from the flood. Their anger mirrors hers, and the

violence they offer Christ has been adequately prefigured by the fisticuffs of the Noah plays. Interestingly, in language and action the scenes in which Christ is beaten contain the same quality and degree of burlesque as those of the man-wife conflict. Thus we find in Towneley:

primus tortor. Godys forbot ye lefe/ bot
set in youre nalys
On raw.
Sit vp and prophecy.
ffroward. Bot make vs no ly.
Secundus tortor. who smote the last?
primus tortor. was it I?
ffroward. he wote not, I traw,
(The Buffeting, ll. 410-414)

questions and language patterns which originate in the buffeting of Noah and his wife:

Noe. Abide, dame, and drynk
ffor betyn shall thou be/ with this staf
to thou stynk;
Ar strokis good? say me/
Vxor. what say ye, wat wynk?
Noe. speke!
Cry me mercy, I say!
Vxor. Therto say I nay.
Noe. Bot thou do, bi this day,
Thi hede shall I breke.
(ll. 380-387)

Similarly, in both York and Chester cycles, the association of Noah's wife with alcohol is extended to the assailants of Christ:

Pilat. Sir Kayphas and Anna, right so nowe
I thynke,
Sittis in mahoundis blissing, and aske vs
pe wyne.
3e knyghtis of my courte, comaundis vs to
drynke,
(York, Remorse of Judas, ll. 124-126)

and again:

This boye doth mee soe greatly anoye
 that I wax dull and pure drye,
 Have done and fill the wyne in hye;
 I dye but I have drinke!
 Fill fast and lett the cuppes flye,
 and goe wee heathen hastelye;
 for I must ordeyne curiouslye
 agaynst these kynges comminge.

(Chester, Magi, ll. 414-421)

Additionally, but on the level of anti-type, we note that the York playwright assigns to Herod three sons (Trial Before Herod, ll. 268-321), who serve their father as devotedly as Shem, Ham, and Japheth serve theirs.

This kind of cross-cycle pattern is not limited to the enemies of God. There are similar parallels even for the followers of Christ when they reveal their weaknesses. The playwrights utilize the biblical precedents at their disposal: the disciples sleeping in the garden and the doubting of Thomas are examples. Furthermore, in addition to the hesitation of Noah and Joseph noted earlier to be common in the cycles, the Wakefield master gives exciting evidence of the figural connection between the flood and the crucifixion. Between lines 335 and 367, Noah keeps careful count of his wife's refusals to his entreaties to board the ark. Finally in an expletive that is not merely anachronistic, the exasperated servant of God responds to her third refusal by exclaiming "Peter!" (l. 367). The disobedience of the wife thus

becomes a significant variation of the disciple's rejection of the only means of salvation.

As we see in the Noah plays, the forces of disorder which threaten the relationship between God and man are clearly very dangerous. The weaknesses of man himself, the subversive nature of his female companion, and the active attempts by the agents of Satan to frustrate God's plan persist. Their temporary defeat has allowed the Second Age of Man to begin, but the real significance of the survival of the ark and its passengers lies in the hope that permanent salvation may be available through God's grace. In this context the experience of Noah, may be seen as part of a consistent pattern. The parallels drawn between the forces of disorder as they occur in the Noah plays and their counterparts in the Passion sequences are evidence of the thematic unity of various cycles. It is only through the repeated identification and rejection of the forces that are inimical to God that man may ultimately escape the finality of death and win everlasting life.

Notes for Chapter Two

- ¹Cursor. Richard Morris.
- ²Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.138.
- ³Ibid., 139.
- ⁴Canterbury Tales, II, 7.
- ⁵An Alphabet of Tales. ed. Mary MacLeod Banks. E.E.T.S. O.S., 126 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1904), p.384.
- ⁶John Mirk, Instructions to Parish Priests, ed. Edward Peacock. E.E.T.S. O.S., 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1868), 11. 57-60.
- ⁷G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) p.386.
- ⁸Ibid., 386.
- ⁹Ibid., 386.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 387.
- ¹¹Woodburn O. Ross, Middle English Sermons (Oxford: University Press, 1960), p.137.
- ¹²A.C. Cawley, Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1974), p.35.
- ¹³M.D. Anderson, Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p.107-108.
- ¹⁴Mystery Plays, Woolf, p.142.
- ¹⁵Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments. ed. Norman Davis. E.E.T.S. S.S., 1 (Oxford: University Press, 1970).

CHAPTER THREE

ESCAPE FROM DEATH

The elements of disorder which oppose God's will are powerful and continue to operate throughout the cycles. Their chief forms, Satan himself, human wilfulness in characters such as Cain and Mrs. Noah, and the pretensions of secular rulers such as Herod and Pilate, persist as forces which threaten man. The Noah play in each cycle, however, is pivotal in that it initiates the message that those who serve God may achieve redemption. If the victory of Satan over Adam in the garden of Eden "brought death into the world, and all our woe", the survival of Noah and his family, even at the cost of the lives of all other human beings, can be seen as a defeat for Satan. By following God's instructions and by preserving the nucleus of a new creation, Noah has given us an understanding of how we, through God's grace, may also escape death and damnation. We have seen in the Noah plays death for the disobedient and life for the obedient, yet the overall message of the cycles deals not merely with the temporary and physical well-being of the few, but rather with the spiritual salvation of all men for all

time. These plays are not just episodes in the panorama of the Bible. Thematically the travails of Noah, the lone righteous man, give cycles clear direction toward the redemption made universally available through the sacrifice of God's only begotten Son.

Before the intervention of Christ may operate to save man, Noah, his offspring and all their descendants must continue to dwell in a world subject to corruption. The Second Age according to the Vulgate and the plays offers man a fresh start in a world which appears new. Of the sinners "all ar drowned" (York, l. 272). The "castels" and "Grete townes" of the proud have been swept away (Towneley, ll. 538-539). The Ludus also emphasizes the destruction ("In þis flood spylt is many a mannys blood" l. 204, and "On Rokkys ryght sharp is many a man torn." l. 233) but the expunging of sin has produced a world in which man may, as he did in Eden, worship God anew. The waters of the flood, baptismal in their destruction, have in two of the plays created a setting suggestive of divine order. The playwrights of York and Towneley associate the hills of Armenia with celestial harmony by calling the location "hermonye" (l. 264) and "armonye" (l. 466) respectively, a clear attempt to gain for their plays the dramatic value of the purity of the Creation.

In each of the Noah plays, moreover, transcendent joy and the rededication of the survivors maintain the spiritual direction of the cycles. In language and in tone, the Chester and Ludus versions typify the relationship which has been reestablished between God and man in all of the plays:

Lord God in majestye
 that such grace hast granted mee
 wher all was borne, salfe to bee!
 Therefore nowe I am boune --
 my wyffe, my children, and my menye --
 with sacryfice to honour thee
 of beastes, fowles, as thou mayest see,
 and full devotyon.

(Chester, ll. 261-268)

This is also expressed through the joy of thansgiving:

Joye now may we make of myrth pat pat
 were frende
 A grett olyve bush pis dowe doth us brynge
 Ffor joye of pis token ryght hertyly we
 tende
 oure lord god to worchep a songe lete vs
 synge.

(Ludus, ll. 250-253)

Amid conditions of tranquillity, gratitude, and hope, the Second Age of Man begins as did the First.

Among the instruments which will maintain order between God and man during the Second Age are those of sacrifice and covenant. The Ludus does not specify the manner that worship of God will take, but the other Noah plays clearly indicate that the rituals of the past, however unsuccessful, will, for the foreseeable future,

remain the means by which man may win grace. The theme of sacrifice recurs throughout the cycles. Its failure, which leads to deadly sin in the Cain and Abel plays, contrasts with the later success of Abraham, who finds favour with God because of his willingness to make an acceptable sacrifice: His son. In every cycle the Noah play is bounded on each side by the sacrifice plays of Cain and Abraham, and thus serves not only as an escape from the sins of the past, but as the beginning of a reconsideration of the need for sacrifice, a reconsideration that culminates in the Passion of Christ. In this context the Chester Noah again follows the Vulgate most scrupulously:

Aedificavit autem Noe altare Domino:
et tollens de cunctis pecoribus et
volucris mundis, obtulit holocausta super
altare.

(Vulgate, Genesis: 20)

In the play, Noah, immediately after descending from the ark, makes a sacrifice that pleases God:

Noe, to me thou arte full able
 and thy sacrafice acceptable;
 for I have founde thee treeue and stable,
 (Chester, ll. 269-271)

and begins a sacrificial pattern that leads all the way from his escape from physical death to the escape from eternal damnation provided by the sacrifice of Christ.

Until the arrival of Christ, however, man must

continue to obey God according to the practices and conventions which, like sacrifice, have already been ordained. God's will, for example, continues to manifest itself by means of a covenant. The Chester play, again consistently, follows the Vulgate closely in recording the seventeen short verses of God's biblical contract in fifty-six lines at the end of the play (ll. 269-324). A whole verse, it may be noted, is allotted to God's injunction against manslaughter alone:

Manslaughter also aye yee shall flee,
for that is not playsante unto mee.
They that sheden blood, hee or shee,
ought-where amongste mankynde,
that blood fowle shedd shalbe
and vengeance have, men shall see.
Therefore beware all yee,
you fall not into that synne.

(ll. 293-300)

The emphasis here, so soon after the murder of Abel, is understandable, but the remaining forty-eight lines of the new covenant sacrifice narrative progress for the sake of some very dry biblical instruction.

The other Noah plays reestablish God's authority differently. In none of these does the figure of God appear after the flood. In York, for example, although Noah's sons have been with him all the time, Noah explains the meaning of the rainbow:

But sonnes he saide, I watte wele when,
Arcum ponam in nubibus,
He sette his bowe clerly to kenne,

As a tokenyng by-twene hym and vs
 In knowlage tille all cristen men,
 That fro þis worlde were fynyd þus,
 With wattr wolde he neuere wastyd þen.
 Þus has god most of myght,
 Sette his senge full clere
 Vppe in þe Ayre of heght;
 The tayne-bowe it is right,
 As men may se, in sight,
 In seasons of þe yere.
 (11. 282-294)

The Towneley and Ludus plays ignore the new covenant of
 the Vulgate but still reassert God's supremacy. In
 language which resembles that of a covenant, the Ludus Noah
 reaffirms his gratitude and commitment:

Oure lord god I thanke of his gret grace
 þat he doth us saue from þis dredful payn
 hym for to wurchipe in euery stede and place
 we beth gretly bownde with myght and with
 mayn,
 (11. 238-241)

while in Towneley Noah's description of the fate of the
 dead is by its nature and language a form of covenant:

All ar thai slayn,
 And put vnto payn.
 Vxor. ffrom thens agayn
 May thai neuer wyn?
 Noe. wyn? no, I-wis/ bot he that myght
 hase
 Wold myn of thare mys/ & admytte thaym to
 grace;
 As he in bayll is blis/ I pray hym in this
 space,
 In heven hye with his/ to purvaye vs a place,
 That we,
 with his santis in sight,
 And his angels bright,
 May com to his light:
 Amen, for charite.
 (11. 546-558)

Interestingly, in keeping with the one-sided distribution of power to be found in Old-Testament covenants, the Towneley play points out (l. 551) that to God is reserved the right to admit "thaym (the drowned sinners) to grace" and so thematically prepares the audience for play XXV, The Deliverance of Souls.

That the concept of covenant is firmly binding upon men possesses its anti-type in the York cycle. As men are reminded of their covenant with God whenever they see the rainbow (ll. 284-287), so are they bound by any covenant between themselves and God's adversaries. Noah, the good servant, embraces the new covenant with God. Judas, the "traytoure", finds later that he cannot escape the terms of his covenant with Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate:

Kaiph. For-sake it in faith, pat he ne
 schall,
 For we will halde hym pat we haue,
 The payment chenys be with-all,
 The thar no nodir comenaunte craue.
 [Nor mercy none].

(York, The Remorse of Judas, ll. 276-279)

Thus the concept of covenant in the Noah plays indicates clearly to medieval Christians that the legalistic restraints which determined man's relationship with God before the sacrifice of Christ remain operative.

Other elements of stability are introduced or reintroduced to give the Second Age a new semblance of divine order after the devastation of the flood. The

characterization of Noah, apart from the quarrel scenes, is consistent in the Chester and York versions. God sees that even after the watery ordeal Noah has remained "stable" (Chester, l. 271), and his strict obedience reasserts itself (York, ll. 273-274). The reestablishment of order is most complete, however, in the Towneley play. In contrast to York, which forecasts a fiery destruction after the next round of man's disobedience:

2 fil. Sir, nowe sen god oure souerand syre
 Has serre his syne þus in certayne,
 Than may we wytte þis worldis empire
 Shall euermore laste, is noȝt to layne.
 Noe. Nay, sonne, þat sall we nouȝt desire,
 For and we do we wirke in wane,
 Fpr it sall ones be waste with fyre,
 And never worþe to worlde agayne.
 (ll. 295-302)

Towneley emphasizes the restoration of stability and fresh opportunity. All the evidence of man's pride has been swept away (ll. 533-540), and a new beginning can be made. Moreover, the figural connection between the ark and the church originally made by St. Augustine¹ and referred to by Kolve² and Huppé,³ Noe significat Christum, archa Ecclesiam is, indeed, utilized by the Wakefield master, "As still as a stone/ oure ship is stold" (l. 525). Here the establishment of the church by St. Peter is foretold in the link between the firm landing of the ark and Christ's famous epigram which traditionally has provided the basis for the authority of the church. This image is

repeated later in the play of Jacob:

As thou art lord and god myne,
 And I Iacob, thi trew hyne,
 This stone I rayse in synges to day
 shall I hold holy kyrk for ay.
 (ll. 53-56)

Similarly in contrast with the endings of the other Noah plays, Towneley provides considerable balance in its vision of the world to come. The world has been divided by the flood into two groups: the survivors and the damned. In a deft contrast, the latter have been "put into payn" (l. 547) while Noah and the former may hopefully anticipate a heaven populated already by celestial beings: saints and angels (ll. 553-558).

Since the spiritual meaning of Christ's sacrifice is the central theme of the cycles, the flood as a means of saving the chosen must be regarded as a failure. The terrible sense of waste is best conveyed by the lament of Noah and his family in the Ludus:

With doolful hert syenge sad and sore
 Grett mornyng I make ffor this dredful
 flood,
 (ll. 198-199)

a repeated cry (ll. 214-215, 227, 234) that dominates the remainder of the play. The theological basis for the flood's lack of success is, of course, God's evaluation provided by the Vulgate. His acknowledgement of the nature of fallen man:

Sensus enim et cogitatio humani cordis in
malum prona sunt ab adolescentia sua,
(Genesis 8: 21)

which is restated in Chester:

Warrye yearth I will noe more
for mans sinnes that greeves mee sore;
for of youth man full yore
hasse bynne enclyned to sinne,
(ll. 273-276)

and echoed in York:

Vxor. A! syre owre hertis are feere for
 pes sawes
 That he saye here,
That myscheffe mon be more,
(ll. 303-305)

and His own accompanying rejection of widespread death and destruction as a form of vengeance, require that a new method for the apportionment of salvation or damnation be established. In this context, it is significant to note that in every cycle, the Noah play is immediately followed by Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. One may argue that this is merely logical, that the next major biblical event was just that episode. If, however, we see the sacrifice of Isaac as a typological fore-runner of the crucifixion, then the positioning of the flood play just ahead of that fore-runner takes on greater meaning. It is important to remember that medieval conventions, such as the multiple stage and scenic counterparts (a concept to be discussed further), convey implications of emphasis or contrast

that add to the message of a play. The Noah plays, therefore, serve as projections from the failure of the flood to the victory provided by the sacrifice of Christ. Lest any viewer of the Chester cycle miss the connection, the playwright in the Abraham play provides an expositor who tells how the Old-Testament sequence involving the bread and wine of Melchysedeck really signified the future body and blood of Christ:

By Abraham understand I maye
 the Father of heaven, in good faye;
 Melchysedecke, a pryest to his paye
 to minister that sacramente
 that Christe ordayned the foresayde daye
 in bred and wyne to honour him aye.
 This signifyeth, the sooth to saye,
 Melchysedeck his presente.

(ll. 137-144)

Although mystery plays seem at first glance to be merely biblically episodic, an understanding of the role of God's grace throughout the cycles reveals an extremely important religious message. Each Noah play shows the man freely offering to render obedience to God. As a result God, in turn, extends His grace to Noah. Not only does He save the family from death by warning of the flood, but often He also provides the practical means by which man may save himself. These aids range from the specific instructions concerning the building of the ark in the Chester and York plays to the magical and spiritual ease with which the ark is completed in the Towneley play.

A scenic counterpart to this form of granting grace is, of course, the location of the lamb in the thicket in the Abraham plays, later episodes which similarly may be seen typologically to project toward the sacrifice of Christ.

It is in this cluster of dramatic events and images following the flood that God's new plan becomes clear. The restoration of order, and the emphasis on obedience and sacrifice are continuing constraints amid which God's ultimate granting of grace may operate. From earliest Christian times, however, the church has taught that "the means by which the grace of God is mediated to men is pre-eminently Jesus Christ -- His incarnation, death and resurrection".⁴ Although the Noah plays, therefore, maintain the contention of the Vulgate that man will continue to sin, the events of the flood have persuaded God that man should have a spiritual means available, not just to escape physical death but to avoid eternal damnation. In this context survival of the flood becomes a figure of the spiritual avoidance of Hell, and the Noah plays in reality are the first of the prophecy plays in each cycle.

Notes for Chapter Three

¹St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. Philip Levine (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1966), IV, 567.

²Kolve, Play Called Corpus Christi, 69.

³Bernard Huppé, Doctrine and Poetry (Rahway, New Jersey: Quinn & Boden Co. Inc., 1959), p.136.

⁴The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), II, 464.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM THE FLOOD TO THE PASSION

If it is the purpose of the Noah playwrights to supplement the biblical narrative as well as to present their plays as integral parts of a single clear message about the redemption of man, it is primarily through the characterization of Noah that they must operate. A modern audience may well be perplexed by the figure on stage. What they see, however, as inconsistency in character or thematic confusion is really the application of dramatic conventions for which they have not been trained. A medieval audience, on the other hand, would have no difficulty in reconciling, for example, the religious message of the play, which parallels church teaching, and the secular social context in which the characters operate. Such an audience would readily accept frequent alternations between sacred and profane levels. Noah, the obedient servant of God, is easily also Noah, the poor fellow down the road who from time to time must beat his shrewish wife.

We have previously seen in Chapter One that the playwrights have drawn similarities between Noah and

Joseph, the husband of Mary. Their humility and initial hesitation before bending to their tasks makes them interesting human types, attractive to an audience. The seriousness of their duties, however, requires them to assume within the same play a more dignified stature. As Joseph will provide the stable family context for the Christ-child, Noah becomes in several ways an authority figure who explains the designs of the Almighty. With the exception of the Chester play, it is Noah who responds to the interrogative refrain, "What may this mean?" He provides the background for the flood and tells the survivors how they must live afterward. Even in the Ludus, where the other members of the family seem as dedicated to God as Noah is, he directs their devotions in a complete restoration of obedience and order at the end of the play.

In consideration of the leadership which Noah gives to his family, it is possible to see him as a kind of priest. If indeed, as Augustine asserts, the ark signifies the church, then God's grace to Noah naturally bestows upon him the role of priest when it takes the form of the ark. Moreover, a study of the York Noah reveals that certain aspects of it are parallel to liturgical practice. There are the use of Latin to express God's thoughts (York, Noah ll. 278 & 283), a suggestion of

communion, "To wynne you brede & wyne" (l. 318), and an ending that is structured like the final prayer at mass, Ite, missa est, but the biblical sequences of the Towneley Noah possess an overall pattern that closely resembles the complete religious service. Noah's opening prayer is an invocation to God similar to the opening prayer at church, and its style is incantatory; the events described synthesize smoothly with the flow of the language:

Noe. Myghtfull God veray, maker of all
 that is,
 Thre persons withoutten nay, oone
 God in endles blis,
 Thou maide both nyght and day, beast,
 fowle, and fyshe;
 All creatures that lif may wroght thou
 at thi wish,
 As thou wel myght.
 The son, the moyne, verament,
 Thou maide; the firmament;
 The sternes also full feruent,
 To shyne thou maide ful bright.
 (11. 1-9)

Noah's work, the building of the ark, is his offering, which he dedicates to God in Latin, the language of the mass (ll. 251-252). From line 523 to the end, Noah, a priest figure, gives the antiphonal response to questions or observations put by the congregation, his wife and sons. Finally, the dramatic and religious experiences culminate in a genuine uplifting of the soul as Noah vividly describes salvation as a rising to heaven past the ranks of saints and angels to a spiritual consummation before

the light of God.

God's grace to man has, in the Noah plays, taken a variety of forms. Assistance in escaping death, combined with the inspiration and will to fulfill God's instructions, has enabled Noah to secure a new relationship between God and man. God has, moreover, reconfirmed certain institutions such as covenant and sacrifice to give men direction in this new relationship. Additionally, as we see in three of the plays, God has created the structure of the church and the office of the priest to guide man in his obedience to and worship of God. Most importantly, however, God has indicated that the sufferings of Noah are to be repeated in an event that will redeem the sins of man and "In heven... purvaye vs a place".

Each of the Noah playwrights establishes the connection between Noah and Christ in a variety of ways. One method common to three of the plays is to forge a father-son connection which focuses on the son as the means of fulfilling God's will. Thus in the Ludus the Lamech sequence immediately precedes the entrance of the ark drawn by his son, Noah and the others. In Chester the ordeal of Noah is followed by the Abraham play, in which that patriarch, Noah-like in his obedience, carefully points out that the son who is to be sacrificed has been

sent by God:

My lord, to thee is myne intent
 ever to bee obedyent.
 That sonne that thou to mee haste sent
 offer I will to thee,
 and fulfill thy commandement
 with hartye will, as I am kent.
 (ll. 217-222)

In the play which came just before, Noah has been directly linked to Christ in a benediction, "Yea, sonne, in Chrystes blessinge and myne" (l. 222), which invites comparison between his situation and that of the Son of God.

Of the three cycles, it is the York Noah which presents him most obviously as a type of Christ. In this play the significance of Noah, the son, is expressed early, on the levels of name and prophecy. If the coming of the Son of God is foretold in the Old Testament, then the role of Noah as a kind of saviour also can be emphasized by supplementing the Vulgate story to give a greater dimension to the birth of Noah. The York playwright evidently draws from the biblical account of God's promise to Abraham:

He prayed to god with stabill steuene,
 Pat he to hym a sone shuld sende,
 And at þe laste þer come from heuen
 Slyke hettyng þat hym mekill amende;
 And made hym grubbe and graue,
 And ordand faste be-forne,
 For he a sone shulde haue,
 As he gon aftir crave;

And as god vouchydsaue
 In worlde þan was I borne,
 (ll. 19-28)

and this example of a God-fulfilled promise to send a son projects across the cycle to its archetype -- the coming of Christ.

Similarly, the York playwright extends the analogy with Christ by including an explanation of the meaning of Noah's name:

When I was borne Noye named he me,
 And saide þees wordes with mekill wynne,
 'Loo,' he saide, 'þis ilke is he
 That shalle be comforte to man-kynne.'
 Syrs, by þis wele witte may ye,
 My ffadir' knewe both more and mynne,
 By sartheyne signes he couthe wele see,
 That al þis worlde shuld synke for synne.
 (ll. 29-36)

The idea of Noah's being a comfort to mankind (l. 32) can have only one interpretation. Since he was able to save only his immediate family, the comfort which he brought must be the opportunity for the succeeding race to regain an acceptable relationship with God. It is a role which he shares with the dove which he releases, "Oure comforte to encesse" (l. 238), and which signifies an end to the ordeal of the flood. It is important to recall at this point that the literal meaning of "Jesus" is "will save",¹ an intent which Christ Himself performs later in the cycle:

Jesus. Pou man pat of mys here has mente,
 To me tente enteerly pou take,
 On roode am I ragged and rente,
 Pou synfull sawle, for thy sake,
 For thy misse amendis wille I make.
 My bakke for to bende here I bide,
 Pis teene for thi trespase I take,
 Who couthe þe more kyndynes haue
 kydde than I?

þus for thy goode
 I schedde my bloode,
 Manne, mende thy moode,
 For full bittir þi blisse mon I by.
 (Mortificacio Cristi, ll. 118-130)

The Ludus Noah play makes the connection between Noah and Christ in a strikingly different way, as we shall see, but the three cycles forge a direct bond between Noah and Christ. Each goes beyond the biblical limits of the Vulgate to show that both figures, impeded by the regrets of female characters, seek through their ordeals to convey mankind to a state of purity.

The figural connection between Noah and Christ is, of course, the most important means by which the message of God's continuing grace extends across the cycles from the flood to the crucifixion. Each Noah play, however, contains other elements which supplement the central image to achieve a fuller dramatic and religious impact. The kind of interpretation that Huppé makes concerning the birds of the ark in the Genesis -- that their return or failure to return to the ark signifies types of man's Fall or Redemption -- seems for a medieval audience used to the image to be readily conventional.² We have already

noted in Chapter Two, for example, the backsliding role that the raven plays in Cleanness and Cursor Mundi as well as the Noah plays, but its counterpart, the dove, may similarly be seen in a role related to God's grace. When the dove returns to the ark (it is reeled in like a fish according to MS. H of the Chester cycle), it is immediately recognized as the bearer of God's grace. Noah in the Chester play, for example, receives the grace amid great joy:

Ah, lord, blessed be thou aye,
that me hast comfort thus today.
By this sight I may well saye
this flood beginnes to cease.
My sweete dove to me brought hase
a branch of olyve from some place.
This betokeneth God has done us some grace,
and is a signe of peace,

(MS. H, 11. 16-23)

an emotion which is so overwhelming in the Ludus that it describes the bird as bringing back a "grett olyve bush" (l. 251). In all of these plays the word "token" is used or implied, a phenomenon which indicates a widespread familiarity with the symbolic meaning of the episode. Similarly in each play the trustworthy nature of the dove is emphasized: the bird is "meke" and "hend" in Chester (MS. H, l. 15), in York "faithfull" (l. 239), and without "faylyng" (l. 258), in the Ludus "fayr" (l. 247) and "frende" (l. 250), and in Towneley three times "trew" (ll. 506, 515, 517).

Perhaps the most significant use of the birds by each playwright occurs on the typological level. If the raven in the Ludus, for example, commits a type of betrayal, the taunt of the First Jew later in The Crucifixion that Christ while on the cross should scare away the crows (l. 890) is seen to be ironic, for that, indeed, is Christ's very purpose. The image is pursued in the Ludus when Pilate in The Resurrection tells the soldiers who witnessed the fulfilling of Christ's promise to rise again, to "go sytten in þe corn/ And chare a-way þe ravyn" (ll. 1550-1551). In this way the audience is reminded that the promise of salvation for all, which began with Christ's agony on the cross, has indeed been fulfilled. Thus the Ludus playwright uses the raven image to bind together the escape from physical death in the Noah play to the provision for everlasting life through Christ in The Resurrection.

In the York Noah the playwright contrasts the action of the raven and the dove effectively (ll. 225-264), but also establishes a clear link between the raven and Judas Iscariot. The raven which failed to return to the ark is a "fayland frende" (l. 228) while in the same cycle, plays later, Judas is a "fales" ("frende" in the ms., The Conspiracy to Take Jesus, l. 247) and a "faynte frend" (Jesus Examined by Caiaphas l. 229).

The image of the dove is combined with those of the rock and the ark in an interesting way by the Wakefield master. As a form of God's grace the bird previously described as "trew" (l. 506) is now as "trew ... as stone" (l. 515) and the playwright proceeds within a few lines to enlarge the pattern to include the ark which represents holy church and is "still as a stone" (l. 525). Thus in a comprehensive pattern in the Noah play, God's grace is seen to assume a wide variety of forms all designed to assist man to understand his relationship with the Almighty. Still on the level of animal imagery in the same cycle, those creatures spared from the flood are shown later to be aware of the significance of the crucifixion:

ffowlys in the ayer and fish in floode,
 That day changid thare mode,
 when that he was rent on rode,
 That lord veray;
 ffull well thay vnderstode
 That he was slayn that day.
 (The Resurrection, ll. 63-68)

Although the Chester Noah is generally less imaginative in its attempt to explain the role of God's grace, we find that the pictures of animals painted on the side of the ark are more than an interesting bit of staging. By God's grace some of us are saved while others are not, and the animals depicted aboard the ark illustrate this message. The Chester playwright has selected

some species to represent all of the animals that Noah was directed to take aboard the ark. Approximately three-quarters of the animals mentioned happen to be creatures also commonly found in bestiaries.³ If we remember the extreme popularity of the bestiaries and the common practice of priests to use the characteristics and behaviour of animals to illustrate Christian teaching, it seems fair to say that the pictures of the animals on the ark serve as mini-sermons to assist the overall message of the Noah play. The ape (l. 174), for example, was commonly believed to bear two offspring. In flight one was carried in the ape's arms while the other clung to its back. The one in its arms would be dropped and taken by the hunter. In this way saved souls are left to God while the devil carries doomed souls to Hell. Similarly, if the heron (l. 182) refuses to look at a sick man, he will not be cured. This is like Christ who turned away from the Jews to the gentiles. Also, the owl (l. 174) in its preference for darkness signifies the rejection of Christ by the Jews. The medieval audience, whether they could read the bestiaries or learned the messages through listening to sermons, would be familiar with these stories, and the images of the animals on the ark suggesting either receipt of or failure to receive the grace of God would clearly strengthen the redemptive message of the

Noah play as a whole. In a variety of ways, therefore, all of the Noah playwrights use the presence of the animals to support the central theme that man may be saved by God's grace.

The figure of the ark itself also projects forward across the cycles to its counterparts in the crucifixion plays. Augustine, in addition to pointing out that "archa [significat] Ecclesiam" also advises that the ark be seen as the wood on which Christ hung.⁴ As Noah leads the human race to escape from physical death, Christ provides the sacrifice that will save man from spiritual damnation. Noah's vehicle, the ark, in bearing his rescued family, foretells the vehicle of Christ, the cross which is the means of man's redemption. Japhett's plea in Chester, again not just an anachronism, draws the attention of the audience to the similar functions of ark and cross,

Mother, wee praye you all together --
 for we are here, your owne childer --
 come into the shippe for feare of the wedder,
 for his love that [you] bought,
 (11. 237-240)

and, in an aside that is otherwise irrelevant, "A, it standys vp lyke a mast", the fourth torturer in Towneley (The Crucifixion, l. 232) makes a comparison between the cross and the mast which threatened to break Noah's back (l. 264).

The most theatrical parallels between ark and

cross, and Noah and Christ, occur in the three cycles, Chester, York and Towneley, and take the form of parody. The treatment by the three playwrights is approximately the same. Noah's adherence to specific instructions and the obedience and ease with which his efforts are characterized, contrast markedly with the approach of his torturers in the crucifixion plays. The tools held up for the audience to view in the Noah plays now take on sinister significance. The "pynne" (l. 61) of the Chester play becomes an "iron pynne" (Passion, l. 195) and Noah's quiet satisfaction with a job well done:

With topcastle and bowespreete,
bothe cordes and roopes I have all meete
to sayle forthe at the nexte weete --
this shippe is at an ende,
(ll. 93-96)

becomes viciousness and vainglory on the part of the third Jew:

Fellowes, will you see
howe I have stretched his knee?
Why prayse ye not mee
that have so well donne?
(Passion, ll. 209-212)

The creation of agony is similarly achieved in the York and Towneley plays, but these cycles illustrate the difference between the divine purpose of the ark and the attempt of fallen men to preserve a corrupt order. The efficiency of Noah is clearly parodied by the confusion and lack of cooperation of the torturers; for example,

York, (ll. 102-128) and Towneley:

iijus tortor. Nay, felowse, this is no gam!
 we will no longere draw all sam,
 So mekill haue I asspyed.
 iiijus tortor. No, for as haue I blys!
 Som can twyk, who so it is,
 Sekys easse on som kyn syde.
 (The Crucifixion, ll. 167-172)

It is frequently through typological patterns such as these that medieval audiences came to understand the ordering force behind God's plan for the salvation of man. The concern of Robertson, however, that mystery plays be seen to contain examples that prove that the lives of everyday men are affected by such patterns⁵ deserves some attention. Modern audiences may well be perplexed by the Lamech sequence in the Ludus Noah play. The juxtaposition of the killing of Cain and the voyage of the ark does, however, present a good example of how ordinary men may or may not qualify for God's grace. Both Noah and Lamech, for example, make "gret (or "grett") mornyng" (ll. 142 and 199), but they operate in very different spiritual contexts. Noah's grief is for man's sin and for the vengeance that God demands. Lamech, on the other hand, is locked into selfishness. His boastfulness:

whyl I had syht per myht nevyr man fynde
 my pere of Archerye . in all pis werd
 A-boute
 Ffor 3itt schet I nevyr at hert Are . nere
 hynde
 but yf pat he deyd . of pis no man haue
 doute,
 (ll. 146-149)

reminds us of Herod, and his murder of the boy reenacts the sin of Cain. Lamech, has, moreover, failed to take advantage of the one hundred years of grace which God granted immediately before the flood (ll. 210-212). The playwright further underlines the difference on the image level through the use of a directional sign for Lamech's target -- Cain is under a "grett busche" (l. 166). This of course, contrasts with the "grett olyve bush" (l. 251) which is the token of God's grace to Noah. Unable to break the pattern of his sinfulness, therefore, Lamech is condemned by the degeneracy of the past and becomes in this play the archetype of doomed man.

Further evidence that the Lamech sequence is designed specifically to illustrate doomed man occurs when we examine the Longeus sequence in The Burial later in the same cycle. Here in a scenic counterpart, we find that Longeus, similarly blind and similarly wielding a dangerous weapon, is forgiven by God and cured of his affliction. Although he has assaulted the body of Christ, he did so unwittingly and in an act of "trost" (l. 1113). He has also, unlike Lamech who killed the boy but like Christ who forgave his enemies, blessed his deceiver, "oure sabath you save" (l. 1118). Moreover, as soon as he learns the truth concerning his actions, he falls to his knees:

Now good lord fforgyf me that
 pat I to be now don have
 for I dede I wust not what
 be jewys of myn ignorans dede me rave
 Mercy mercy mercy I crye,
 (ll. 1127-1131)

to seek forgiveness, an action which his sinful counterpart, Lamech, did not even contemplate. In this the Ludus playwright clearly illustrates how God's grace may enter the lives of common men to lead them to salvation.

We see, therefore, that the various playwrights in attempting to express the message of God's grace make use of the Noah story and a wide variety of dramatic techniques, images, and patterns, in ways that were fully familiar to their audiences. In doing so, they create a dramatic experience which transcends the simple biblical narrative and has the potential to bind each viewer more closely in a personal way through the figure of Noah to the sacrifice of Christ.

Notes for Chapter Four

¹Interpreter's Dictionary, II, 869.

²Huppé, Doctrine, pp. 174-175.

³Florence McCulloch, Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

⁴Augustine, City of God, IV, 567.

⁵D.W. Robertson, Jr., Essays in Medieval Culture (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 219-220.

CONCLUSION

The Noah plays in their cycles take on dramatic proportions that are able to supplement our understanding of how medieval man saw himself in relation to God. It is immensely significant that each playwright freely invented action, sacred or profane, that would explain how the events of Noah's flood form an important part of a long, consistent, and divine message.

The indications are clear in each play that medieval man understood himself to be in the same kind of predicament as Noah. The choice is there for all to make: acceptance of God's will or wilful rejection of Him. The plays plainly state that to be saved one must structure his life according to the principles of divine order and obedience. We understand from the plays that practices such as covenant and sacrifice, so instrumental in saving Noah, have, through the figure of the ark and the ordeal of its builder, been supplemented by the institution of the Church and the crucifixion of Christ, forms of God's grace that lead directly to the salvation of man.

The decision is, of course, complicated by man's fallen nature, by the distractions of his contemporaries, and by the deliberate interference of Satan. These threats,

which occur in various forms such as Noah's doubts about his ability to build the ark and the resistance of his wife, reach across the cycles to include their counterparts in sleepy or vacillating disciples and the secular officials who mount violent assaults on Christ Himself. By yielding to these forces in their contemporary forms, man enlists on the side of Satan and qualifies for damnation. By rejecting them, man qualifies, like Noah, for survival and receives the grace which God freely extends to all men through the crucifixion of Christ.

In relating the events of the flood to the events of the Passion, all of the Noah playwrights illustrate the unity of Christian history. The flood is seen to operate as part of a coherent plan to save mankind, a plan founded upon the obedience of man and the availability to him of redemption and eternal life. Moreover, the playwrights using such conventions of their dramatic tradition as typology and scenic counterparts also succeed in varying degrees in achieving the primary purpose of drama: to make an unequivocal statement about the condition of man in a way that forcefully improves the understanding of the audience. To this end each of the Noah plays reveals that the experiences of that patriarch are a guide for every Christian. Not only do they draw a comprehensive pattern for the dutiful conduct

of daily life, but they also, without exception, reinforce the doctrine of divine grace by prophetically looking ahead toward the climax of each cycle, toward the consummate means of receiving grace through the sacrifice of Christ.

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