

THE BIBLICAL FLOOD: NEW THOUGHTS, NEW QUESTIONS

I. Introduction

A flood of great proportions is described in Genesis 6-9. The text never indicates that it was anything other than a historical event. The Flood, and, or Noah, the builder of the Ark, are mentioned 7 more times in the OT. These passages are Gen.10:1,32; 11:10; I Chron. 1:3; Isa. 54:9; and Ezek.14:14,20. The NT also assumes that a great deluge came on the earth as the result of God's judgement: See Matt. 24:37-39; Lk. 3:36; 17:27; Heb. 11:7; I Pet. 3:18-21, and II Pet. 2:5; 3:3-7. (See *Noah and the Flood in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Tradition* in the *Biblical Archaeologist*, Dec. 1984.)

The Pseudepigrapha, a corpus of extra-biblical literature written from the Second Century B.C. to the First Century A.D., likewise contains many references to a catastrophic Flood. It is found most prominently in the books of I Enoch, Jubilees, and the Genesis Apocryphon.

Josephus, a very important historian of the First Century, expounds on the Flood as he recounts Jewish history in his *work Antiquities of the Jews*. He basically recounts the Biblical story, but adds that the Flood began 2656 years after Adam. Josephus, who had access to all the libraries of Rome, quotes from many pagan sources (some which are no longer available) who also wrote about a historical Flood.

II. The Extent of the Flood (Four Theories)

A. The Flood is mythological (no flood at all)

This is, of course, the liberal and naturalistic position, however, I am personally aware of some scholars, (scientists) still calling themselves evangelicals, who do not believe the Flood of Genesis was a historical event. They do, however, believe the story was inspired by God and was meant for our religious instruction.

B. Local flood (a river flood)

This view became popular after a massive flood deposition (8 ft. thick) was discovered in Mesopotamia by archaeologist, Leonard Wooley in 1929 as he was excavating the Biblical city of Ur. Since ancient non-biblical flood stories which predated the Biblical event were discovered in Mesopotamia, Wooley speculated that these flood legends and the Biblical event could have been based on this massive local river flood.

Problems with a local flood:

1. When a similar flood deposit was discovered in the nearby city of Kush it was found that the two layers were not laid down contemporaneously.
2. Later excavations at Ur showed that this *flood* did not even inundate the entire city. (For more critique on Wooley's claims see: "*Has Archaeology found Evidence of the Flood.*" by John Bright in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Dec. 1942.)
3. A river flood is generally over in a matter of days. The Biblical flood lasted a little over a year.
4. It seems a little absurd to be involved building a boat as long as Noah (possible as long as 120 years) of that tremendous size (over 400 feet) if the flood were a mere river flood.
5. Why would an ark be necessary as Noah and his family simply could have migrated to higher ground?
6. Even local people could have escaped by moving to higher ground.
7. It seems to underplay the severity of the sin described in Genesis 6 (Whatever it was, it was serious!)

C. Regional Flood

1. Currently the idea of a regional flood may be the most popular view in Christendom. Even many non-Christians believe a great regional flood occurring thousands of years ago may account for many of the Flood stories found in ancient literature. Recently, this view was given some credibility with the publishing of *Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event that Changed History*, by William Ryan and Walter Pitman. These two geologists from Columbia University discovered that at one time the Mediterranean Sea was a desert and the Black Sea a small fresh water lake. They present what seems to be a solid case for their claims. They then built a case for the straits of Gibraltar giving way to form the Mediterranean Sea due to a rising Atlantic Ocean from melting icecaps. Later, about 7000 years ago, Ryan and Pitman believe the rising water spilled over the Bosphorus Straits to form the Black Sea. This latter event is what they believe could account for the ancient Near Eastern Flood stories. They arrive at the date of 7000 years ago by dating the fresh water mollusks (found by doing core-drilling) which were found in a layer under salt water mollusks. In their continuing search for evidence, they found the ancient shoreline of the freshwater lake and underwater archaeological sites 12 miles off the coast of Turkey. Their theory coincides with the dates historians say Europe was settled. The major

problem with the Ryan and Pittman thesis is that it contradicts the Biblical account which has the Ark land in the region of Ararat (Uraratu). The flood they believe they discovered does not seem to have affected this area which is southeast of the Black Sea.

The regional Flood theory is also becoming increasingly popular among evangelicals who also hold to the concept of the full authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Here's how they argue their case:

- a. Often universals in the languages of the Bible and the ancient Middle East are a literary device (hyperbole) used for emphasis. A universal in the Bible is not always universal. For some examples where universal language is not meant to be universal, see: Gen. 41:57; II Chron. 36:23; Dan. 2:37,38; Joel 3:2; in the NT see Jn. 4:39; Col. 1:23, et.al. In other words, the sense of the passage is: *All the mountains Noah knew, were covered.*
- b. The Biblical word used for *Earth*, (*eretz*) has many different meanings. It can mean *the whole earth*, or it can mean *land* or even *country*. In about 80% of its usage in the OT it means *land*. Therefore, according to this argument, the Flood did not have to encompass the whole globe (earth) but only the known world or region of the writer.
- c. The amount of water needed to cover all the high mountains (the Himalayas) does not support a universal flood; it would require 8 more times the amount of water that exists on the earth.
- d. There is a lack of geological evidence for a world-wide catastrophe. Proponents of this theory claim the sedimentary layers as they currently exist could not have been laid down in the brief period of the Biblical Flood. Some of these sediments are more than a mile thick. This view (regional flood) also, as a general rule, accepts the fact that the earth is millions of years old.
- e. Even though the Flood was regional and people could have migrated to higher ground, the Ark was necessary in God's plan to fulfill God's redemptive purposes (the typology). The construction of the Ark was a graphic warning of the seriousness of Noah's message.
- f. There is a problem with the universal view of gathering species of animals from remote continents.

2. Problems with the Regional Flood Theory

- a. If not all humanity died in the Flood then it is conceivable that there are multitudes of people who have not descended from the three sons of Noah. In II Pet. 2:5 the writer uses the Greek word *cosmos* for *world* which is a more all-encompassing word than the Hebrew word *eretz*, which can mean *land*, *earth*, or *world*. The word *cosmos* is the same word for *world* found in John 3:16. A casual reading of I Pet. 3:20 seems to indicate that only 8 people survived the Flood.
- b. It is also argued that if the judgement referred to in II Pet. 3 is universal, then surely the judgement of the Genesis Flood was universal. Note, however, that those holding to a preterist view of NT prophecy (see Briefing #60) believe the judgement referred to here is the local judgement on the nation of Israel at 70 A.D.
- c. If you hold this view and conclude that the earth's sediments were laid down over millions of years (rather than by the Biblical Flood) it seems rather awkward to not also hold to some theory of evolution. There are a few who hold this view but do not allow for any evolution. Most, however, concede to some form of Theistic evolution.
- d. The genealogies of Genesis 11 do not, at least on the surface, allow for great ages and an old earth. There are possible gaps and it would not be unusual to skip a generation or two. However, if these alleged gaps admit thousands of years, do not the genealogies themselves lose their value? Then there is the troubling mention of Cush in Genesis 10:8; he was the grandson of Noah? He is mentioned as building cities, cities of which we know from history, and which are dated as beginning no later than 3000 B.C.

D. A Universal Flood

1. There are several variations:
 - a. All the lands, continents, and mountain ranges were covered simultaneously, i.e., all land was submerged. This view believes this is demanded by the Biblical language.
 - b. The Flood was global in extent, but all land was not covered simultaneously. This view seems to preserve the integrity of the Biblical account but yet explain the lack of water necessary to cover the world's highest mountains (see: C.1.c., above)
 - c. All continents were joined at the time of the Flood, hence all land was covered. This view potentially eliminates the problem of the animals

coming from remote continents. (See: C.1.f. above).

2. Arguments for:

- a. The Universal language of the Flood account. Genesis 7:19 *...and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.* As if there is any question the writer seems to reinforce his argument by the use of the phrase *entire heavens*. See also the argument for the universality of the judgement in II Pet. 3 as noted above.
- b. The signs of calamity in the geological sphere, i.e., the mass extinction ones sees in the fossil record. This explanation became known as Flood Geology since it teaches that most of the sedimentary rock we see today in the geological record was laid down during the Flood of Genesis. This view was first popularized in the book: *The Genesis Flood*, by Whitcomb and Morris. Currently, its most able defenders are Kurt Wise, Steve Austin, John Baumgardner, Walter Brown, Art Chadwick, Leonard Brand, and John Morris. It should be noted here that all of the above also defend a young earth view, as do most who hold to this position. All the above have Ph.d's in relevant areas of science. For a good summary of this position, see the defense by Steve Austin in *The Genesis Debate*, Chapter 10.
- c. There are universal traditions in antiquity. From all continents there are stories preserved in the form of myths of some ancient cataclysmic deluge. Over 200 of these stories have been cataloged. A few of these can be explained by the coming of white explorers and missionaries, but not all of them. (See *The Flood Myth*, edited by Alan Dundes.)
- d. The need for an Ark indicates the Flood was universal. If the Flood was local or regional there would be no need for an Ark. Noah and his family could have simply fled to higher ground as per the warning.
- e. The size of the Ark. Why, they ask, would you need such a large, ocean-sized vessel if the Flood were just local. (Equal in capacity to over 500 railroad cars)
- f. The nature of God's covenant with Noah would be meaningless if it were just a local event. Was the Noahic Covenant meant only for a specific people? In what region would the covenant apply? Contemporary examples of catastrophe. Flood geologists point to contemporary examples such as the eruptions of Mt. St. Helens and Krakatoa to show what geological changes can take place in a very short time by minor events compared to a global flood.

- g. Linguistic Arguments for a Universal Flood. Two Georgian Linguists concluded that the proto-Indo-European language originated in Eastern Anatolia about 6000 years ago (See: *The Early History of Indo-European Languages*. **Scientific American**. March, 1990. Their research could be interpreted as arguing for a common origin of mankind in Eastern Turkey, site of the mountains of Ararat!
3. Arguments against a Universal Flood
- a. A universal flood of one year duration which was the cause of most of the earth's rock layers flies in the face of modern uniformitarian geology which claims the sediments were laid down largely by ocean currents over aeons of time.
 - b. Modern science, geology and astronomy claim the earth is millions of years old.
 - c. The universals of the Biblical language do not have to be interpreted as global.
 - d. It is often charged that those who believe in a universal Flood theory have to resort too often to supernaturalism to explain their theory. This is largely in reference to all the species of the earth coming to the Ark and the problem of the care and feeding of the same for over a year.
 - e. Perhaps the knottiest problem for the young earth theory and a recent flood is the continuous occupation of the ancient city of Jericho. There seems to be credible evidence for the continuous occupation of Jericho all the way back to a pre-pottery era, i.e., to about 9000 B.C. There is no evidence of a Flood. There seems to be only three possibilities: a regional flood which was elsewhere, a flood which occurred before 9000 B.C., or we could question the dating methods. Currently, there is no satisfying answer that we are aware of.

III. The Flood Mechanism

Mechanisms of the Flood: The Bible only mentions the fountains of the great deep and the rain. "...on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights." Gen. 7:11,12.

There are many speculative theories that try to explain how the above Biblical description might have occurred from a geo-physical perspective, such as: a comet flyby, the earth being hit by a large meteorite, the earth shifting on its axis, a

combination of earthquakes, vulcanism, giant tsunamis, etc. The local Flood theory needs no elaborate explanation; it was simply a monsoon and swollen river. The current theory for a regional Flood, as mentioned above was the melting of the polar icecaps. But what caused this sudden melting? The two current explanations held by Evangelicals who hold to some type of universal Flood theory are:

A. The Collapse of a Vapor Canopy

1. The Theory

This theory holds that the firmament described in Gen. 1:8 was a vapor canopy that completely surrounded the earth and made the earth like one big greenhouse (even at the poles). The collapse of the canopy, along with subterranean water caused the universal flood. This theory was popularized by the above-mentioned book: *The Genesis Flood*. It was further developed by Joseph C. Dillow in *The Waters Above: Earth's Pre-Flood Vapor Canopy*.

2. Problems with the vapor canopy

Despite still being widely-held, scientists who believe in a young earth and a universal flood are rapidly abandoning the idea of a vapor canopy. There are at least two reasons:

(a) scientific problems: there is a problem with the mechanism that would hold such a canopy in place and what could cause it to collapse. It has been shown that with such a canopy in place with sufficient volume of water to cause a flood of universal proportions life on earth would be intolerable due to the amount of heat. (See *Can the Canopy Hold Water?* by Glenn R. Morton in *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, 16:3:164-169.)

(b) In Gen. 1:6-8 *God said, Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water. So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse sky... .* The Hebrew word for *expanse* is *raqia*, and the best interpretation of this word is a solid dome or barrier. It is highly unlikely that *raqia* should be seen as an invisible water vapor canopy. The Creation story of Genesis was not meant to be seen in the light of current scientific knowledge. It was a polemic against false gods and pagan ideas about creation, and was meant to strengthen the Israelites as they were about to enter into the idolatrous land of Canaan. God is revealing the truth to his people in a cosmological context they understood. The ancient belief was that the sky was solid and behind it

was another ocean. When it rained, the windows of heaven were opened. This kind of language is seen throughout the Bible. Indeed in Psalms 29:10 and 104:2-3 the *heavenly ocean* is still in place. This may not be scientifically accurate but there is precedent throughout Scripture. Jesus once said that *evil comes from the heart*. It's not scientific in that the heart is a muscle, a pump, but it communicated to the readers then because they saw the heart as the center of being. (For an excellent article on ancient cosmology see: *The Firmament and the Water Above*, Paul H. Seely in *Westminster Theological Journal*. There are two parts to this study. Vol 53, pp.227-40, and vol. 54, pp.31-46.)

B. The Runaway Subduction Model

This new mechanism for explaining a cataclysmic, universal flood has been (and is being) developed by Dr. John Baumgardner of Los Alamos National Laboratory. This explanation involves plate tectonics, the rapid sinking of the pre-flood ocean floor, and the rapid breakup of the earth's land which at one time (before the Flood) was one land mass. Current scientific thinking pretty much agrees that all the continents were once joined. Baumgardner, however, has shown through computer models how this could have taken place rapidly in less than a year. He has already won awards for his presentations and papers. His ideas were recently featured in *U. S News and World Report*, June 16, 1997. Read it on the web at: www.usnews.com/usnews/issue970616/16terr.htm

- IV. Conclusion: While the Baumgardner thesis holds promise we still do not know the exact mechanism God used to cause the Flood. The date of the Flood is likewise, hazy, though it must have been somewhere in a range 5000 to 7500 years ago. Those who hold to a regional Flood are not denying the inspiration of Scripture, though it too, is not without its share of knotty problems. Both positions have explanatory value, both have areas that leave us just a little uneasy. The Flood was a supernatural event with a natural component. It may be that we will never be able to delineate between the two this side of time, but we can still worship and stand in awe of a Creator, a holy God, who chose to judge the world and make a gracious offer of escape.

For Further Study

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