

How should we interpret the Genesis flood account?



"I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the face of the land every living thing that I have made." — [Genesis 7:4](#)

Introduction

The Genesis Flood of [Genesis 6-9](#) tells a fascinating story. Sometimes referred to as Noah and the Ark, it is a common fundamentalist claim that the biblical flood must have been a worldwide one, or else Scripture as a whole is undermined. From this point of view, the flood is often used in an attempt to account for the geologic column, which is otherwise seen as evidence of a very old Earth. However, a balanced interpretation of Scripture does not force the reader to believe that the Flood was a worldwide phenomenon. The scientific and historical evidence summarized below supports the idea that the flood was indeed catastrophic, but that it was local, recent and limited in scope. Beyond its place in history, the Genesis Flood is also a part of the greater narrative of the Bible. It highlights theological points concerning human depravity, faith, obedience, divine judgment, grace and mercy.¹

The History of “Flood Geology”

In the 19th century, a growing body of extrabiblical evidence began to undermine the traditional belief in a global flood. As early as the first half of the 19th century, geologists and theologians Edward Hitchcock, Hugh Miller and the Rev. John Pye Smith viewed this evidence not as a threat to faith, but as an occasion to reach a better understanding of Genesis.²

But in the 20th century, George McCready Price, a Seventh-day Adventist from Canada and self-taught amateur geologist, took a less compliant stance and began the modern flood geology movement, which ascribes many features of Earth’s present state to a recent, global flood. In his book *The New Geology*, published in 1923, Price explained the Christian fundamentalist perspective of geology, and he did so with such style and sophistication “that readers untrained in geology are generally unable to detect the flaws.”³ Others followed Price in the modern flood geology movement, including Byron Nelson, Harold Clark, Alfred M. Rehwinkel, John C. Whitcomb, and Henry M. Morris.

In the 1950s, Bernard Ramm, a baptist theologian and author of *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, along with J. Laurence Kulp, a geologist and Plymouth Brethren member, critiqued Price’s book by pointing out critical errors and omissions.⁴ Ramm, Kulp and others encouraged the American Scientific Affiliation and other organizations not to support flood geology.⁵ In 1961, Young Earth Creationists Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, Jr. updated Price’s work by writing *The Genesis Flood*. This book argued that the creation of the Earth was relatively recent, and that the Fall of Man started the second law of thermodynamics. The book also claims that Noah’s Flood was global and produced most of the geological strata we see today. Many regard the work of Morris and Whitcomb to be a major foundational step in the development of modern day creation science, which has since gained a worldwide foothold.

Let us now consider the actual evidence for this position from both the Bible and from science.

A Local Flood

The language used in Genesis 6-9 does not insist that the flood was global.

First of all, the Hebrew *kol erets*, meaning whole Earth, can also be translated whole land in reference to local, not global, geography. The Old Testament scholar Gleason L. Archer explains that the Hebrew word *erets* is often translated as Earth in English translations of the Bible, when in reality it is also the word for land, as in the land of Israel.⁶ Archer explains that *erets* is used many

times throughout the Old Testament to mean land and country. Furthermore, the term *tebel*, which translates to the whole expanse of the Earth, or the Earth as a whole, is not used in [Genesis 6:17](#), nor in subsequent verses in [Genesis 7](#) (7:4, 7:10, 7:17, 7:18, 7:19).⁷ If the intent of this passage was to indicate the entire expanse of the Earth, *tebel* would have been the more appropriate word choice. Consequently, the Hebrew text is more consistent with a local geography for the flood.

Moreover, in this period of history, people understood the whole Earth as a smaller geographical area. There is no evidence to suggest that people of this time had explored the far reaches of the globe or had any understanding of its scope. For example, the Babylonian Map of the World,⁸ the oldest known world map, depicts the world as two concentric circles containing sites of Assyria, Babylon, Bit Yakin, Urartu, a few other cities and geographic features all surrounded by ocean. There are also small, simple triangles that shoot out from the ocean labeled as *nagu* or uncharted regions.⁹ Contextual evidence also suggests that Greek geographers developed comparable maps during the middle of the first millennium, where Greece was positioned in the middle of a circle surrounded by oceans.¹⁰ These maps remind us that people were most familiar with the regions surrounding their homelands. Therefore, to say that something happened in the *kol erets* — or referring to "all people" ([Genesis 6:13](#)), — would have been an appropriate way of referring to the entirety of Earth and its population in a manner in which ancient Israelites would have been familiar. Davis A. Young, author of *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence*, sums this up when he states:

"Given the frequency with which the Bible uses universal language to describe local events of great significance, such as the famine or the plagues in Egypt, is it unreasonable to suppose that the flood account uses hyperbolic language to describe an event that devastated or disrupted Mesopotamian civilization — that is to say, the whole world of the Semites?"¹¹

Scientific Problems with a Universal Flood

There are a number of practical problems that conflict with the idea of a global flood.

First, a universal flood would have changed the topography of the land. For example, in the event of a worldwide flood, the Hiddekel, or Tigris, and Euphrates rivers of [Genesis 2:14](#) would have disappeared under layers of flood-laid sedimentary rock.¹² Instead, the Euphrates is mentioned again in [Genesis 15:18](#), and the Hiddekel is alluded to in [Daniel 10:4](#). This suggests that the rivers' integrity was maintained.¹³

Second, it would require an inordinate amount of water to flood the entire Earth. One popular

explanation for this problem is that prior to the flood, the world was watered by mist from a global canopy of water vapor which then condensed, causing the first rains to flood the Earth ([Genesis 2:5-6](#)). However, this explanation is incongruent with archaeological evidence that concludes ancient Mesopotamia — the land of the Tigris and Euphrates — was “an extremely arid environment that necessitated the use of irrigation for successful agriculture.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the pressure necessary for the condensation of such a large quantity of water would have been fatal for all living creatures. In fact, a closer look at the Septuagint version of the Old Testament shows that the word for fountain was used in place of the word for mist. Some modern translations have used similar words like stream and spring.¹⁵ In either case, the water is said to have risen from the Earth, which makes it more likely that these terms were referring to irrigation canals.¹⁶ A similar terminology is used in reference to the flood ([Genesis 7:11](#)), where “fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened.” But when we look closely at the original Hebrew text and consider the use of the words fountains and deep in other passages, it is more likely that the fountains of the deep were also irrigation canals.¹⁷

Another supposition is that all animals and humans are derived from the survivors on Noah’s Ark. There are several problems with this idea. First of all, there is no way that the 2 million known species of animals could have fit onto the ark — not to mention the estimated 10 to 100 million species yet to be discovered. The dimensions of the Ark were 300 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits ([Genesis 6:15](#)). At 18 inches per cubit, the Ark would have been 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet tall. This was indeed a large ship by the standards of the time, but not nearly large enough to carry such a vast and varied cargo. Getting all of the animals to fit on the ark, along with the necessary food would not have been feasible. Some have argued that not all species were included, but only representatives of each type. Not only would this still represent an improbably great number of creatures, it would also require that the evolution of related species be drastically accelerated after the flood, in order to account for current diversity of species.

Finally, the migration of animals across mountains and oceans is quite difficult to explain. To make matters worse, there are no traces of animal ancestors along the proposed courses of migration. These are just a few of the many scientific problems with interpreting [Genesis 6-9](#) as a truly universal flood. Efforts to find physical evidence of a global flood have failed. Even some of the most capable Christian researchers, including John Woodward, George Frederick Wright, William Buckland and Joseph Prestwich, all failed in their searches. Young states, “It is clear now that the evidence they were searching for simply does not exist.”¹⁸

The Location of the Flood

Assuming that the Flood was local, its location has not yet been precisely determined. Though excavation of flood deposits in Mesopotamia provides evidence of ancient flooding, there is no evidence that it is unambiguously the biblical flood. ¹⁹ Young writes:

"Nevertheless, the stratigraphy of some of the Mesopotamian flood deposits, literature pertaining to Gilgamesh and ancient Sumerian cities, the New Eastern setting of the biblical account, and the obvious affinities of the biblical and Mesopotamian flood traditions all converge to suggest that there may very well have been a catastrophic deluge in the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys that severely disrupted the civilization of that area — a civilization that represented the world to the biblical writer — and it may be that this is what the biblical story is all about."²⁰

Scholars still speculate about where a great flood may have occurred in the Near East. For example, in the 1990s Columbia University geologists William Ryan and Walter Pitman concluded that a massive local flood took place in the area we now know as the Black Sea. They theorized that when the Ice Age ended and glaciers melted, a wall of seawater surged from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea.²¹ This flood, which may have occurred around 5500 B.C., would fit into the Old Testament timeline of Noah's Flood. Robert Ballard, famous for finding the *Titanic*, led a 1999 expedition with the hope of finding more evidence for this theory. The expedition revealed an ancient shoreline for the Black Sea, and after radiocarbon dating, the findings supported their hypothesis that a freshwater lake and surrounding manmade structures were in place before the flood. Conflicts with the Black Sea explanation do exist, however. For example, 5500 B.C. is too early for Noah to have used metal tools to create the ark, and the location of the Black Sea does not fit the Sumerian and Babylonian accounts of the flood, which strongly suggest that it took place in Mesopotamia.

The location of the flood remains mysterious and of continued interest to modern geologists.

Other Flood Stories

Many flood stories permeate mythology around the world. At one time these flood stories were thought to be evidence of a global flood; proof that its survivors carried the story with them from the Near East as they spread out around the globe.²² It is now clear, however, that the evidence for this claim is lacking.

Some of the most notable compilations of these stories were collected by James Strickling and Byron C. Nelson.²³ Strickling did a statistical analysis comparing 61 flood stories from around the world. After comparing their similarities and differences, he concluded that one family of eight

people could not have populated the Earth after a worldwide flood catastrophe. In order to account for the many stories throughout the world, Strickling concludes, "Either catastrophic flooding of global or near-global dimensions occurred more than once, or there were more survivors of the Great Deluge than one crew, or both."²⁴ In 1931 Nelson compiled more than 41 flood stories and found that despite their remarkable similarities, there were also striking differences. For example, only nine of the 41 stories mention the preservation of animals and only five mention that there was divine favor on those saved from the flood.²⁵ With regard to these differences, geologist Dick Fischer writes, "However tempting it might be to attribute all those ancient stories to a one-time global catastrophe to conform with the traditional interpretation of the Genesis Flood, a literal reading of Genesis does not require it, and the unyielding revelations of nature and history disavow it."²⁶

According to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, the "Flood stories are almost entirely lacking in Africa, occur only occasionally in Europe, and are absent in many parts of Asia. They are widespread in America, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific."²⁷ This evidence again raises concerns for the theory that flood stories have all spread from one original source.

Lessons of the Flood

Regardless of the details surrounding the event, there are significant theological lessons to be learned from the Flood narrative.²⁸ In the early church, Tertullian, Jerome, Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Augustine understood the story of the flood to encourage moral conduct.²⁹ For example, Noah can also be used as an example of Christian perseverance, since he had great faith to build the Ark that God commanded (see [James 5:11](#)). Origen, Jerome, Augustine and others also employed other allegorical methods to illustrate Christian principles.³⁰ Being conversant with other flood stories from ancient Mesopotamia as well as the general theology of Genesis will also help us understand the point of this story. The biblical flood is a response by God to the corruption of humanity, save Noah. The flood waters are not a random punishment, however, but an undoing of creation — a return to the state of chaos that existed before God gave order (this is described in [Genesis 1](#)). The waters of chaos had been kept at bay by the firmament, the *raqia*, which is a solid dome above, and by the earth below. That is how Earth became habitable. When we read in [Genesis 7:11](#) that the "fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened", it means that God is letting the barriers give way so that the waters of chaos can crash back down upon the Earth, thus making it uninhabitable again. In other words, God's intention in this story is to bring Earth back to its state of chaos and start over again, with a new "Adam" (Noah). We will read throughout scripture that God's plan of "starting over" will culminate in Jesus, the "last Adam" ([1 Corinthians 15:45](#)).

Conclusion

An uninformed reading of the Genesis story neither permits nor requires it to be a universal, global flood, and geology does not support a universal reading. A non-global interpretation does not undermine the lessons learned from the Genesis Flood account that are pertinent to the life of faith.

Consulted Experts:

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Pete Enns](#) in drafting this response.

Notes

1. Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 312.
2. *Ibid* p.152.
3. *Ibid*. p. 245.
4. Seung-Hun Yang, "Radiocarbon Dating and American Evangelical Christians," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith: The Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 45 (1993), <http://www.asa3.org/asa/PSCF/1993/PSCF12-93Yang.html> (accessed January 22, 2009).
5. *Ibid*.
6. Gleason Archer, *Survey of OT Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1964), 194.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Map of the World BM 92687*, British Museum, London.
9. Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 20-42.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 312.
12. Dick Fischer, "Young-Earth Creationism: A literal mistake," *Perspective on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no.4 (2003), <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Fischer.pdf>.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*.
15. For example, see the [NIV](#) and [TNIV](#) translations. The [New Living Translation](#) also uses "springs" instead of "streams."
16. Dick Fischer, "Young-Earth Creationism: A literal mistake," *Perspective on Science and*

- Christian Faith* 55, no.4 (2003), <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2003/PSCF12-03Fischer.pdf>
17. *Ibid.*
 18. *Ibid.* P. 252.
 19. Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 225.'
 20. *Ibid.* p. 252.
 21. Lisa Krause, "Ballard Finds Traces of Ancient Habitation Beneath Black Sea," *National Geographic*, (2000), <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2000/12/122800blacksea.html> (accessed May 28, 2008).
 22. Dick Fischer, comment on "Genesis Flood," Message Board of the American Science Affiliation, comment posted April 27, 1996, <http://www.asa3.org/archive/asa/199604/0281.html> (accessed March 8, 2008).
 23. Dick Fischer, comment on "Genesis Flood 2," Message Board of the American Science Affiliation, comment posted April 25, 1996, <http://www.asa3.org/archive/asa/199604/0279.html> (accessed March 8, 2008).
 24. James E. Strickling, *Origins: Today's Science, Tomorrow's Myth* (New York: Vantage Press, 1986), 33-39.
 25. Byron C. Nelson, *The Deluge Story in Stone* (Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1931), app. II, figure 38.
 26. Dick Fischer, comment on "Genesis Flood," Message Board of the American Science Affiliation, comment posted on April 27, 1996, <http://www.asa3.org/archive/asa/199604/0281.html> (accessed March 8, 2008).
 27. Dick Fischer, comment on "Genesis Flood 2," Message Board of the American Science Affiliation, comment posted on April 25, 1996, <http://www.asa3.org/archive/asa/199604/0279.html> (accessed March 8, 2008).
 28. There are many sermons and articles available on line about this topic.
 29. Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 15.
 30. *Ibid.*, 15.

Further Reading

Lectures

- Rudwick, Martin. [Demythologising the Historical "Conflict" Between Geology and Genesis.](#)

Articles

- Deem, Rich. "[The Genesis Flood: Why the Bible says it must be local.](#)" GodAndScience.org.
- Fischer, Dick. "[Genesis Flood.](#)" American Scientific Affiliation.
- Fischer, Dick. "[Genesis Flood 2.](#)" American Scientific Affiliation.
- Hasel, Gerhard F. "[The Biblical View of the Extent of the Flood.](#)" Origins 2.

Books

- Lucas, Ernest. *Can We Believe Genesis Today? The Bible and the Questions of Science.* 3rd ed. Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
 - Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate.* Intervarsity Press, 2009.
 - Young, Davis A. *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.
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