

The Flood

1. The Account of the Flood

1.1 Background. Following the fall of man in Genesis 3 sin and wickedness spread and grew worse with each subsequent generation (4:15-24; 6:5-6, 11-12). Genesis 6:1-4 refers to intermarriage between the “daughters of men” and the “sons of God”. Whoever the “sons of God “ were (and the most natural reading is that they were angelic beings, cf. Psalm 29:1; Job 1:6; Wenham, 1987: 139-140), their activity appears to have precipitated the judgement that follows. The sins of mankind brought about their destruction in what amounted to a reversal of the process of creation (6:7; cf. 1:20, 24-30).

1.2 Preparation. Only Noah was found to be righteous in that generation and so he his wife, his three sons and their wives were to be spared. In order to effect this deliverance Noah was commanded to build an ark, which was basically a large barge 135m long x 22m wide x 13m high. The ark was to have three decks and be sealed with pitch inside and out (6:14-16). The dimensions given and the lack of any means of either steering or propulsion indicate that the ark was designed simply to be a very stable floating box. The time period allowed for the construction of the ark was 120 years (6:3). Noah was left in no doubt as to the purpose of the ark (6:17-19; 7:2-4; cf. Heb. 11:7), but was not required to launch expeditions to collect specimens of every creature: the animals would come to him (6:20; 7:8-9, 15). The text of Genesis is silent about whether Noah did anything else to warn his generation other than to build the ark.

1.3 The Flood. Table 1 below provides a detailed chronology of the events described in Genesis 7-8. The duration of the flood was 314 days, after which Noah remained in the ark a further 57 days until the earth was completely dry.

Table 1: The Chronology of Noah’s Flood

Noah’s Age	Day/Month	Day of Flood	Event	Reference
480	?	--	Command to build the ark	6:3, 13-21
599/600	10th / 2nd	-7	Command to enter the ark	7:1-4
600	17th / 2nd	0	Flood begins	7:6, 10
600	27 / 3rd	40	Rain stops	7:12, 17
600	17th / 7th	150	Ark grounds on a mountain	7:24; 8:4
600	1st / 10th	224	Mountains become visible	8:5
600	10th / 11th	264	Flight of the raven	8:6-7
600	17th / 11th	271	1st flight of the dove	8:8-10

600	24th / 11th	278	2nd flight of the dove	8:10-11
600	1st / 12th	285	3rd flight of the dove	8:12
601	1st / 1st	314	Waters receded	7:11; 8:13
601	27th / 2nd	371	Earth completely dry	8:14

1.4 Aftermath. Just as the Lord had shut them into the ark (7:16) it was the Lord who commanded Noah to leave it (8:15-17). We have already noted how the flood has been represented as a reversal of creation (see 1.1), the aftermath of the flood is pictured as a new creation. This is demonstrated by the repetition of the Creator’s command to the living creatures on the ark (8:17; cf. 1:22) and to Noah and his sons (9:1, 7; 1:28). However, the text is clear that this is still a marred creation (8:21; 9:2). In the post-flood world fear of man would characterise the animal world, for man’s diet would now include meat (9:2-3), but only meat which had had the blood drained from it (9:4). Likewise, murder would not go unpunished (9:5-6).

After leaving the ark Noah’s first act is to build an altar and offer a sacrifice to the Lord (8:20). In response the Lord promises not to send another world wide flood and establishes his COVENANT with Noah, as the representative of the created order, to that effect (8:21-22; 9:8-17) (see COVENANT 3.1).

2 The Extent of the Flood

A number of biblical arguments have been advanced to demonstrate that the text of Genesis teaches a global flood. a) The phrase “over all the face of the earth” (*NIV*) (Gen. 7:3; 8:9) is used in Genesis only in a universal sense (1:29; 11:4, 8, 9). b) Genesis 7:19 refers to “...all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.” The phrase “under the entire heavens” is used elsewhere in the OT only to refer to the whole surface of the earth (Deut. 2:25; 4:19; Job 28:24; 37:3; 41:11; Dan. 9:12) unless the phrase is qualified as it is in Deut. 2:25. c) The geological cause of the flood, the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep refers to a global rupture of the ocean bed. d) The location of the ark after the flood in the region of Ararat in Armenia is not consistent with a local flood in the Euphrates Valley. Such a flood would have moved the ark into the Persian Gulf (Austin, 1990:210-219).

Supporters of the local flood theory point out that the Bible often uses universal language when only a partial quantity is meant and cite examples such as Gen. 41:57; 1 Kings 18:10; Psalm 22:17; Matt. 3:5; John 4:39 to support their case. However, taken to its logical conclusion this argument would limit all universal references in Scripture and ignores the hermeneutical maxim that context determines the meaning of a word. The writer of Genesis was well aware that “all” could be understood in a limited way so in 7:18 he used a Hebrew superlative which effectively ruled out such an interpretation (Leupold, 1949: 301-302).

3 Extrabiblical Parallels

Accounts of a great flood have been found in nearly all nations and tribes, from every continent, totalling approximately 270 (Vos, 1982:319). These traditions contain many similarities to the biblical account of the flood, many mentioning man's wickedness as its cause, the building of a boat and eight survivors. Perhaps more significantly all, except the biblical account, place the landing of the survivors on a mountain somewhere in their own locality. In contrast to this Genesis records the ark's landing on the mountains of Ararat, a locations far to the North of Israel, a fact that lends support to the originality of this account (Custance, 1979: 28).

The most famous of the extrabiblical flood traditions, the *Gilgamesh Epic (GE)* (Pritchard, 1973:65-75) is worth discussing in some detail. This Babylonian account of the Flood, dating from c. 1600 BC has been much discussed, but it seems helpful here to point out some of the many parallels with the biblical account. For completeness the similar *Atra-hasis Epic (AE)* is also referenced (Lambert & Millard, 1969: 89-99).

Ur-napishtim (the hero) is warned of the impending destruction of the world (*GE* 11:14-23; cf. Gen. 6:6-7, 13), and commanded to build an ark (*GE* 11:24-31; *AE* III.i.22; cf. Gen. 6:14-21) in the form of a large cube (*GE* 11:30; cf. Gen. 6:15). Into this he was told to bring all living things (*GE* 11:27-28; cf. Gen. 6:19-20). Ur-napishtim obeyed (*GE* 11:33-85; cf. Gen. 6:22). He sealed the ark with bitumen (*GE* 11:53; *AE* III.i.33; cf. Gen. 6:14), constructed six decks (*GE* 11:60; cf. Gen. 6:16 - 3 decks), and divided each deck into nine sections (*GE* 11:62), laying in supplies of food (*GE* 11:76; cf. Gen. 6:21). The ark took 7 days to build (*GE* 11:76; *AE* III.i.36-37; cf. Gen. 6:3 - 120 years [?]), a remarkable feat if the workers drank as much wine as the *Gilgamesh Epic* records! (*GE* 11:72-74). The *Atra-hasis Epic* records that the hero warns the people of the coming flood (III.i.38-50), the *Gilgamesh Epic* makes no mention of a period of grace in which the hero could warn others (cf. Gen. 6:2; 2 Peter 2:5) (Heidel, 1949:230). All the beasts of the field went aboard (*GE* 11:85; cf. Gen. 7:13-16), together with the hero's family (*GE* 11:83-84; cf. Gen. 7:7-8) and workmen (*GE* 11:86), after receiving the divine command to enter (*GE* 11:86-88; cf. Gen. 7:1-3). Once inside he is told to close the door (*GE* 11:93; cf. Gen. 7:16).

There follows a description of the Flood (*GE* 11:96-128; cf. Gen. 7:14-24). The mountains are submerged (*GE* 11:109; cf. Gen. 7:20-22) and the gods are frightened by the deluge. They flee and "cower like dogs in heaven" (*GE* 11:103-106; *AE* iii.4-54). The "flood wind" blows for six days and six nights (*GE* 11:127-128; cf. Gen. 7:12 "forty days and forty nights") and all life on earth is destroyed (*GE* 11:129-131; cf. Gen. 8:2-3). The flood ceases on the seventh day (*GE* 11:131; cf. Gen. 8:1-2). Ur-napishtim opens a window (*GE* 11:135; cf. Gen. 8:6) and discovers that he has landed on a mountain (*GE* 11:140-144 'Nisir'; cf. Gen. 8:4 'Ararat'). After a further seven days (*GE* 11:145; cf. Gen. 8:6 - forty days) he sends forth a dove (*GE* 11:146; cf. Gen. 8:7 - 'raven') which came back because it could find no resting place (*GE* 11:146-148; cf. Gen. 8:9). So he sent out a swallow (*GE* 11:149; cf. Gen. 8:8 - 'dove') which also came back (*GE* 11:150; cf. Gen. 8:9). He then sent out a raven that did not return (*GE* 11:154-155; cf. Gen. 8:7). On seeing this he left the ark (*GE* 11:155; cf. Gen. 8:15-19) and offered a sacrifice (*GE* 11:155-158; cf. Gen. 8:20), which the gods smell (*GE* 11:159:161; *AE* III.v.34-35; cf. Gen. 8:21-22). The gods then bless the hero (*GE* 11:189-196; cf. Gen. 9:1-17). The god who caused the flood arrives and is furious that some have escaped death, and the

other gods have to do some fast talking to escape his wrath (*GE* 11:170-189) (Wenham, 1897:159-164).

Whatever the similarities between the accounts the many significant differences must not be ignored (Lewis, 1992: 799). In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the Flood comes as a result of a heavenly council in which the gods Anu and Enlil decide to destroy mankind. According to Akkadian *Atra-hasis Epic* this was “for multiplying and making too much noise” (*AE*, I.354-356). However, Ea and Enki give the hero a ‘tip-off’ and he is able to build an ark and escape. There is no hint of Yahweh being capricious in the Genesis account, which is also strictly monotheistic. Heidel points out that in the Genesis account Noah is deliberately set aside because he was righteous (cf. Deut. 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; Ezek. 18:20), but in the *Gilgamesh Epic* the same judgement was intended for all, even though it states that not all were sinners (*GE* 11.180). There is little true justice in the gods’ purposes (Heidel, 1949:226-227).

The gods of Mesopotamia were unable to control the powers they had unleashed, yet God remains in total control of the Flood (Gen. 8:1-2). Even the nature of the sacrifice demonstrates the difference between the two accounts. The gods “swarm like flies” over the sacrifice of Ur-napishtim because man had been created to feed the gods, and they had gone hungry for 14 days! Enlil is obviously not omniscient as he did not know that anyone had escaped. Jack P. Lewis writes:

The ethical motivation and the monotheism of the biblical story are not elements of the Mesopotamian legends. In the biblical story, after the flood Noah and his family replenish the earth; but Ur-napishtim and his wife are transformed into gods, making them immortal, and thus isolated from the general human condition. The Genesis story attests the mercy and judgement of the Lord. Its religious interpretation of the cataclysm contrasts with the more obscure message of the Mesopotamian stories (Lewis, 1982: 799).

The Greek version of the Flood story comes down to us in two forms. In the most common version Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha survive the flood by taking refuge on the peak of the highest mountain in Greece, Parnassus (Graves, 1960:139). They repopulate the earth by casting stones behind them as they descend the mountain, which then turn into men and women. In the second version Deucalion survives the Flood by building an ark (Guerber, 1991:24-25). Other accounts state that there were other survivors of the Flood, including Megarus, son of Zeus; Cerambus of Pelion, and the entire population of the city of Parnassus (Graves, 1960:139-140), so in these accounts the Flood was seen as a failing to deal with mankind effectively.

Despite dogmatic statements claiming dependence upon the Babylonian account of the Flood most writers now agree that this explanation ignores the many differences in the accounts. The most that could be conceded is that the accounts owe their similarities to a more ancient source (Bergman, 1994: 208-209). There is no real reason why the Genesis account of the Flood cannot be treated as historically accurate, the final version of an older account handed down from Noah and his sons.

4 Geological Evidence for the Flood

4.1 Leonard Woolley's "Flood Stratum" at Ur. In 1929 Sir Leonard Woolley discovered a thick layer of sediment while excavating in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia. Woolley believed that the Bible was dependent on the Sumerian record of the Flood (Woolley, 1929: 21, 29) and argued that:

This deluge was not universal, but a local disaster confined to the lower valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, affecting an area perhaps 400 miles long and 100 miles wide; but for the occupants of the valley that was the whole world! (Woolley, 1929:31).

Nor was the flood anthropologically universal for according to Sumerian records some of the cities of the valley survived the flood (Woolley, 1929: 22, 32). Woolley's discovery was soon linked with a similar discovery in the remains of the city of Kish and used as evidence to support a local flood that inundated the entire Euphrates valley. However, further research proved that the two deposits were not contemporary and extremely local events, not even covering the whole of the city of Ur. This led to the conclusion that geological evidence for a local flood appeared to be missing.

4.2 The Flood Strata Theory. Two books this century have significantly influenced the way in which many conservative Christians interpret the geological evidence for the flood. These are George McCready Price's *The New Geology* (1925) and Henry Morris & John C. Whitcomb's *The Genesis Flood* (1961). Both of these works rejected many of the assumptions of modern geology and attempted to establish flood geology as an alternative explanation for geological features. In both the author(s) noted that the majority of the world's surface was made up of sedimentary rock they pointed to the flood as the primary agent in their production and deposition. Following on from these works modern Flood Geologists cite a number of evidences in support of their position. a) Large scale, soft-sediment deformation features. The presence of soft-sediment deposits is consistent with rapid deposition as the flood waters receded. It is far more difficult to account for non-consolidated condition if they are viewed as having been formed at great depths over enormous periods of time. b) Widespread, catastrophically deposited sedimentary strata. The sheer size of many areas of sedimentary deposits points to a flood far greater than what we are accustomed to today. c) Widespread elevated erosional surfaces. The formation of these elevated plains are easily explained in terms retreating flood water, but not in terms of any current geological process (Austin, 1990:221-225). d) Formation of coal deposits underneath floating logs. Research carried out at Spirit Lake following the eruption of Mt. St. Helens has provided empirical support to the theory that coal deposits are not the result of gradual deposition in swamp conditions. Instead they form underneath floating mats of uprooted trees. The trees eventually sink and are covered by sediment, producing a formation identical to the petrified forest in Yellowstone National Park.

A detailed discussion of the geological evidence for the flood is beyond the scope of this article. What is clear is that much research remains to be done by Flood Geologists to provide more empirical evidence for their claims rather than simply pointing out inconsistencies in the majority scientific view. Nevertheless, it must be noted that critics of Flood Geology have often failed to understand all of their proponents arguments and as a result have misrepresented their position (Ratzsch, 1996: 98-102).

5 Noah's Flood in the New Testament

5.1 Gospels. Jesus referred to Noah's flood to illustrate the suddenness and unexpectedness of his return (Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27). In the midst of the steady rhythm of life sudden judgement would sweep the people away, just as it did in Noah's day. Clearly Jesus accepted both the reality and the universality of the flood.

5.2 Letters of Peter. Peter's first reference to the flood comes in the midst of his encouragement to persecuted believers to endure suffering for the sake of Christ. His argument is compact, but draws a parallel between the deliverance of the eight people in the ark and the salvation won by Christ on the cross. The waters of the flood are said to symbolise baptism through which the believers have already passed (1 Peter 3:13-22). The reference to the construction of the ark emphasises both God's patience with unbelievers and Peter's acceptance of the historical account of the flood, even down to the detail of the number people saved (vv. 20-21). Much of the interest in 1 Peter 3:20 centres around the identity of the "spirit" whom Christ preaches to. The most common interpretation today is that this refers to Christ's post-resurrection ministry proclaiming his victory to the fallen angelic spirits who married the daughters of men in Genesis 6:1-4 (Davids, 1990: 138-143).

Peter's second reference to the flood (2 Peter 2:5) follows very closely Luke 17:26-31 and 1 Peter 3:20. It speaks of the judgement of the fallen angels, the people of the ancient world (except Noah and seven others) and the destruction of Sodom (except Lot). Peter's point is made clear in vv. 9-10: God is able to protect the righteous while bringing punishment on unbelievers. Again the number of people saved in the ark is mentioned (v. 5). The reference to Noah as a "preacher of righteousness" is not derived from the Old Testament, but from a Jewish tradition (*Sibylline Oracles* 1:148-498). The flood motif occurs again in chapter 3 again in connection with judgement. The response of unbelievers to the apparent delay in God's punishment is said to have been the same as that of those before the flood. They were proved wrong in their assumption that God would not punish them, and likewise unbelievers in Peter's day would be proved wrong when God brought an eschatological judgement of fire (2 Peter 3:3-7).

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