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# Noah's Flood: 3: Approaches to Reconciliation

**This paper, carefully revised by Dr. Filby, late Lecturer in the History of Science, N.E. London Polytechnic, just before his death, deals with such problems as the extent and possible physical causes of the Flood.**

Although there have been, and still are, many different views about the Genesis Flood it is possible to make some general classification of these before looking briefly at the more important.

The explanations given of the Genesis account fall into two major groups: (1) those given by writers who believe that the Biblical record was set down or in some way guided by Divine inspiration, and (2) those given by writers who reject all such conceptions.

In the world of learning today it is probably true to say that the majority would hold that the biblical account is simply an ancient Hebrew myth or legend probably borrowed from the Babylonians and arising from a local event of no historical importance. Believers in the Bible, on the other hand, are by no means surprised at this, seeing that it is but the exact fulfilment of the prophecy made by Peter (II Pet. 3: 3 – 6) which states that in the last days men will argue that all things have continued as they were from the beginning, such men being willingly ignorant of the destruction of the ancient world by the Flood. So frightful

are the full implications of the Bible teaching on the subject that it is little wonder that men should try to lose sight of it by asserting that it is a mere myth or second-hand account of a relatively small local event of no historical or spiritual significance. Believers in the Bible are not then surprised that modern views of the Flood have been fitted into those theories which effectively remove God from the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and hence from the remainder of man's reckoning. If there was . . . and is . . . a Divine judgment . . . men do not want to know.[1]

But let us look more closely at the view that the Genesis account is only a myth derived from the Babylonian story. If it is a myth it is not one of two or three. It is one of literally hundreds and these not merely from the lands of the Middle-East but from almost all lands. This fact is conceded by nearly every one today whether believers in Genesis or not. The most typical comment on this may be put in the words of M. André Parrot in the Encyclopædia Britannica (1966. Vol. 9. 456b.):-

> It seems that the traditions of the flood fall into two groups to one of which belong the cuneiform (both Sumerian and Akkadian) and Hebrew narratives. These may to some extent have inspired the Greek story of Deucalion and just possibly that of Manu in Sanscrit literature. Behind them would lie a historic flood of catastrophic proportions which inundated the Tigris-Euphrates basin. To the other group belong the rest of the legends which having no necessarily factual basis are to varying degrees mythical or legendary, and are not connected with the first group.

A somewhat similar view was expressed by Sir James Frazer.[2] Many other writers however believe that even for this second group there must have been some actual historical basis and although some may be connected with a local flood the traditions of this have become merged with still more ancient tribal recollections of a yet more ancient flood . . . in fact that of Noah. The subject is too vast for discussion here, the total number of Flood legends being difficult to estimate. Dr. Richard Andree[3] has studied 88 drawn from the five continents and concludes that 62 are not directly descended from the Babylonian or Hebrew accounts. Egerton Sykes[4] lists about 70. In my book on the Flood I have

referred to 33, but I have collected over the years more than 220 world-wide references, not counting 50 in classical Greek and Roman literature or the numerous cases where the Day of the Dead is linked either with the Deluge or with a time around October-November, which is the Biblical date for the commencement of the Flood. [5] My own conviction from these studies is that almost all the stories go back ultimately (whatever they may have picked up in the course of time) to one historical event — the Genesis Flood. Many have been distorted by local colouring and customs, a few have become merged with local flood stories and some have been merged with the story of creation. Again a small number have been influenced by contact with Christian missionaries, or with Jewish or Arab traders. I see no reason to suppose that the Greek story of Deucalion's flood — and there are quite a number of other independent Greek references to the Flood — was derived from the Babylonian.

So far as the many accounts of the Flood are concerned it seems to me quite reasonable to believe that the descendants of Noah multiplied and spread, ultimately to Asia, Europe, Africa and America carrying with them, in ever more distorted form, the story of the Flood. The fact that almost every tribe and people possess a story of Creation and another of a subsequent Flood can surely be explained most simply by a belief that the present human race is a homogeneous community descended from a common stock, just as the Bible account of Noah and his sons informs us. The Biblical account of the Flood probably written down in some primitive form and preserved through Abraham to Moses is clearly the most detailed and accurate historical record.

I shall not deal here with the view that the Bible account is descended from the Sumerian or Akkadian, as I have discussed this previously. [6] Only one further comment might be made. Even M. Parrot concedes that any Flood involved in the Babylonian account must have been of " catastrophic proportions ".

We must next consider the extent of the Flood as envisaged by those who do not accept that the Genesis account is either inspired or is even a primary source of information. Many have

held that a flood in the Tigris-Euphrates valley would meet the requirements. That a number of large inundations did occur in that area is a plain fact as is shown by the great silt layer at Ur, and by the various layers at Kish, Erech and Nineveh. It is probably now only of historic interest that Sir Leonard Woolley was convinced that the layer at Ur was due to Noah's Flood, having been deposited, in his view, by water more than 20 feet deep. The fact that other deposits at other centres represent different periods, even centuries apart, seems to show that the area was for some time unstable and liable to extensive flooding.

But others have felt that even apart from the Bible story there is evidence of a much wider flood than a mere marine transgression into the Mesopotamian area. Sir Henry Howorth,[7] it may be remembered, was not a believer in the Bible story. Yet he says:-

> A very great cataclysm overwhelmed a large part of the earth's surface. A vast flood buried great numbers of animals under beds of loam and gravel, and there was a sudden change in the climate of regions like Siberia and Alaska.

With this verdict other careful geologists like Prestwich[8] and G. Wright[9] agree and give a large amount of evidence that the events there reflected were not part of the Ice Age but occurred some time later. Now it is probably true that in the three large volumes of Howorth, and in the smaller treatise of Prestwich, and the many chapters of G. Wright, these authors have here and there overstressed some part of their argument, and in a few points modern discoveries may have modified some of their conclusions, but so far as I am aware, the majority of these findings have never been disproved. We have then at least one non-believer in the Bible story (Prestwich and Wright were to some extent believers) providing evidence for his belief in a flood vastly exceeding that of a local affair in Mesopotamia.

In more recent times we have a number of others who (at least in their books) make no reference at all to any biblical Flood yet speak of very widespread floods since the end of the Glacial Period. Prof. King,[10] for example, speaks of the recent inundation

of vast areas of East Asia, leaving the islands and peninsulas such as Borneo and Malaya as relics. Prof. Charlesworth, [11] too, has much to say about movements at the end of the Quaternary Era involving millions of square kilometres of the earth's surface. That these continued into the so-called 'Recent' is certain, and such vast floods as the Flandrian cannot have been far removed in time from the beginning of the Neolithic period. How many such inundations, what area they covered and what caused them are problems for serious scientists today, quite apart from any belief in Noah's flood. But it is clear that a very widespread flood of catastrophic proportions and far exceeding the Tigris valley is by no means ruled out on geological grounds. In fact it is certain that such a flood or floods happened since the end of the Ice Age. W. B. Wright says that deposits from the so-called 'Flandrian' flood will be found to be of almost world-wide extent.

We come next to consider the views of those who believe that the Bible is in some way an inspired record. Here again we have two fundamentally different approaches. There are those who believe the story to be inspired — but that there was no (important) Flood. The second group believe that the account is the inspired record of an actual historical event, although of course recognising that its spiritual importance is paramount.

The first group argue that it does not matter whether there was a real Flood, an actual man called Noah with three real sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, who went into an actual wooden ark. The story, they say, may have had some foundation in a local flood in the Tigris valley or it may not — it does not matter. It is, they argue, like all the other early chapters of Genesis an inspired myth, intended to teach some spiritual lesson. To quote one correspondent:-

> All nations have their unwritten folklore, including tales of creation and flood. It is my view that the Babylonian and Biblical writers used folk tales as vehicles for religious lessons; their readers would recognise this fact immediately in a way we could not today. Divine inspiration after all could use fiction as a medium in the case of the parables; why should it not have used folklore if that were a suitable medium for the people of ancient Israel, especially if the

> medium was already widely used and recognised? All this means that I personally am not remotely concerned whether the details of the Flood story are historical or not, any more than I would concern myself with trying to elicit the name of the Unjust Judge of the parable.

But very many believers in Divine inspiration will have none of this. That the Flood has primarily a spiritual lesson to teach, all will agree. Christ Himself said so. But to assert that its historicity does not matter is simply to bury one's head in the sand. Problems will not go away because we refuse to look at them.

What then are the views of those who believe that the Bible tells of a real historical event, sent by God as an actual judgment [12] on sinful men who ignored His warnings, a judgment which conveys, because it really happened, a terrible warning to all men down the ages who reject God's truth?

Let it be said at once that those who hold to such views do so, not from some old-fashioned rooted objection to the theories and speculations of the so-called 'liberal' critics, but from a deep conviction that our Lord in the Gospels is not quoting the Flood in the same way as we might quote Pilgrim's Progress, but that He is speaking in awful solemnity of coming events which will one day be as truly historically fulfilled as the events of Noah's day and the later destruction of Sodom (Luke 17: 26-36) truly belong to history.

These views may be divided into two. Some hold that the Flood covered the entire planet in one year. Some assert that the Scriptural text does not warrant such a view.

The view that the Flood was universal was naturally held by the majority of writers down the years. It was to be expected that while men had no real idea of the size of the planet, or of the complexity of life on it, no one saw any special problem. As time went on however the more thoughtful realised that some problem did exist, both in the amount of water required to flood the entire globe to a depth of several miles at one and the same

time, and in the accommodating of representatives of every one of the many species of living creatures which were being recognised, in one ship for one year. [13]

For a considerable time men held that the existence of fossils on the tops of hills and mountains was a proof of the universality of the Deluge. Such an explanation can still be found in various parts of the world. The Toradjas, a tribe in the Celebes who gradually mingled with and replaced the original neolithic Toalas, not only have a story of a flood that destroyed all their rice, but consider the sea-shells found in the local mountains a proof that the flood reached these heights. It is interesting to note that not only do some Mongolian groups point to fossils in mountains as a proof of a great flood, but even some Eskimo who have found whale bones in mountains regard these as proof of a flood which they say was caused by the world tilting over.

The idea that fossils in general were the result of the Deluge was held by men like Sedgwick, Faber, Chalmers, Ure, Fairholme and Young. For a time Cuvier and Buckland supported it, but ultimately changed their view. G. H. Pember, in a book which had a considerable influence in its time (mainly because of its concentration on the history of the occult) — *Earth's Earliest Ages* — holds to a universal flood, but gives no particular reason for his view, and it must be remembered that he was not a geologist.

Attempts have been made in recent years to revive some form of scientific theory for a universal deluge responsible for all or most of the geological strata. Such a theory requires at least two vast hypotheses: first that all existing geology books are in error, and second, that some huge external supply of water arrived on the planet in the 600th year of Noah.

The first hypothesis, namely that all previous ideas of geology were completely wrong was propounded by George McCready Price in a succession of books which relied mainly on pointing out a number of problems in geology, and in emphasising that in some places the usual order of strata is much disturbed or even reversed. Price's views which were thoroughly examined and

criticised by Bernard Ramm [14] have met with negligible interest in this country. As one Professor of Geology, (a keen Christian) said to me, "My first year students could point out the fallacies in Price". Three American writers who have followed Price's theories are Byron Nelson, *The Deluge Story in Stone*, 1931; A. Rehwinkel, *The Flood*, 1951; and H. W. Clark, *The New Diluvialism*, 1946. The view is also being taken up widely by the American Creation Research Society. These works have been followed in recent years by those of Henry Morris, John C. Whitcomb Jr., and D. W. Patten.

The first of these, *The Genesis Flood* by Morris and Whitcomb [15] is a beautifully produced volume of over 500 pages. The book is, one can only say kindly, neither well written nor well planned. It roams over many topics, not in any very clear order, but relies fundamentally on Price's Geology and on the hypothesis of a vast water-vapour canopy round the earth which descended as rain at the time of the Flood. The Authors wander off into discussions on evolution, micro-evolution, entropy, thermodynamics and the origin of the universe, sometimes leaving the reader bewildered as to how they arrived at such subjects in a book supposedly on the Flood. Professor J. R. van de Fliert has expressed his criticisms of this book in this **JOURNAL** (1970, **98**, No. 1.) and Dr. R. E. D. Clark, while not entirely agreeing with van de Fliert's position, has nevertheless also rejected Morris and Whitcomb. Alan Stuart, Professor Emeritus of Geology in the University of Exeter is equally downright in his rejection of Morris and Whitcomb. [16] But perhaps most telling is the little paragraph in the very Foreword of the book, written by Professor J. C. McCampbell, a geologist, who says:-

> For the present at least, although quite ready to recognise the inadequacies of Lyellian uniformitarianism, I would prefer to hope that some other means of harmonization of religion and geology, which retains the essential structure of modern historical geology, could be found.

D. W. Patten, in a beautifully produced volume of 336 pages, [17] follows similar lines to those of Morris and Whitcomb, but attempts to formulate an astronomical 'model' for the cause of the Flood.

Patten again overstresses the attack on uniformitarianism, failing to realise that modern geologists are quite prepared to believe in periods of vast changes which could truly be called catastrophic. He side-tracks whole sections into attacks on Darwinism, and gives long summaries of theories of the earth's original formation which many will feel are quite irrelevant to his main thesis. He also plainly subscribes to the view that many of the geological layers were put down in the Genesis Flood. On p. 161, for example, he says:-

> Within one crisis year as described by this model 200,000,000 years of vague, implausible, unsatisfactory uniformitarian fabric is compressed; this includes all developments classified as 'mesozoic' and 'cenozoic'.

He goes on to speak of a yet earlier catastrophe which accounted for the palaeozoic — another 400,000,000 years in one single event. Such theories are hardly likely to encourage respect for the rest of the book.

Patten's main contention is that the cause of the Deluge must be sought in terms of astronomical events, and he outlines a theory for the close approach of a small planetary body of mass between that of Mercury and that of Mars, and accompanied by ice at very low temperatures. This body might have come within 30,000 miles of the earth, but not near enough (Roche's limit) for disintegration and capture. He concludes that the encounter might have left some millions of cubic miles of ice in space, some of which was captured by the earth (possibly causing an ice age). This might have been responsible for a slight shift in the earth's centre of gravity thus causing the Flood, and at the same time it might have destroyed the vapour canopy thus adding to the waters of the flood. Patten does not so far deal successfully with the problems of the heat of entry into our atmosphere which must be experienced by ice falling from outer space.

It will be seen that this is an ingenious if confused attempt at a reconciliation. If one leaves out of account the idea that the Flood caused two-thirds of the geological strata, that the ice-age came after the Flood and not before it, and that there was a

vapour canopy, one has left the suggestion, made long ago by the English theologian and mathematician, William Whiston [18] (1667-1752), that the flood was caused by some astronomical event — a possibility that should not be too lightly dismissed, although Patten himself has not found the right answer.

We come now to consider the views of those who feel that the theories so far advanced are not entirely satisfactory. Those of whom I am now speaking hold to the accuracy and inspiration of Scripture, to the necessity of interpreting its passages according to what they feel to be the true canons of Biblical exegesis, and at the same time to the careful consideration and assessment of the facts as well as the theories of geology. Among such might be mentioned Edward J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1949; E. F. Kevan, *New Bible Commentary*, I.V.F. 1953; Meredith G. Kline, new edition of the same work, 1970; and the splendid little commentary of Genesis in the Tyndale series by Derek Kidner, 1967. [19]

The majority of such writers hold that while the literal text of Genesis 6-8 could possibly be taken to refer to the entire planet in our 20th century meaning of the word 'earth', yet there are numerous passages in the Bible where such terms and others like them are quite plainly never intended to be taken in any such fashion. Some, like T. C. Michell, in the I.V.F. *Bible Dictionary* are non-committal, and conclude that "dogmatism is not reasonable either way". But many feel convinced that the Genesis account, when weighed as a whole and in the light of sound Biblical exegesis, while requiring a flood much greater than that of the Tigris valley, does not necessarily require one covering the entire earth in our modern meaning of the word.

Here, however, the idea suggested years ago by Sir J. W. Dawson is worthy of at least more than passing consideration. It has been pointed out by Charlesworth and many others that the end of the Pleistocene was indeed a time of considerable upheavals, and even in the so-called 'Recent' there have been many earth movements on a gigantic scale. It may then be that the Flood which Noah encountered was the last of a series the

earlier ones of which had devastated other regions, proving fatal to the scattered human groups, but not exterminating all other forms of life at any given time, some creatures being able then to migrate to regions unaffected. Noah's Flood would then have been responsible for the final destruction of the human species except for those in the Ark, and, but for the animal species preserved in that vessel, the world would have lost a considerable number of creatures essential for man's future life on earth. This is of course speculation, but may be worthy of consideration. The great Flandrian Transgression may be one of this series and the Genesis Flood another.

We come now to the question of the date of the Flood. Those who rely on Ussher's chronology would place it at around 2349 B.C. There are many variations around this date owing to the uncertainties concerning the chronology of the book of Judges, and of the stay of the Israelites in Egypt. There are other variations due to the different figures given by the LXX, the Samaritan Pentateuch, by Josephus, and by Africanus and others. These allow for a margin of nearly a thousand years. There is also the probability that names are omitted from the lists, as witness Cainan son of Arphaxad given (from the LXX) in Luke 3: 36 but not in the Hebrew of Gen. 11. Again, Ezra the priest gives 17 names between himself and Aaron but there were in fact about 40 generations in that span.

Efforts have been made to date the Flood by reference to the signs of the zodiac, or to the position in the sky of other constellations in which some of the ancients are said to have thought that they discerned the outline of a great ship but these have led to no final conclusions. [20]

Some attempt was made to suppose that the Flood might be placed in one of the lesser known periods of Egyptian history, such as the times of the Seventh Dynasty. These have also been abandoned. [21]

If we accept the suggestions of geologists that the Glacial Period ended about 10,000 B.C., if this was followed by a period

of considerable earth-movements with floods like the Flandrian at perhaps 5,000 to 6,000 B.C., and great climatic changes around 5,000 B.C., and if we then accept as reasonable a date around 3,000 B.C. for the rise of the great dynasties of Egypt and Sumeria we could easily accept a date around 4,000 + or − 1,000 B.C. for the Flood, and remembering that for the last 50 years archæologists have been bringing down the estimated dates for the first dynasty of Egypt, we are coming to dates that are not so far removed from those of the Bible especially if we use the the LXX chronology.

We come lastly to a consideration of the possible physical causes involved in such a flood. That the ultimate cause of the Genesis Flood was spiritual all Christians will agree. The question for the moment is to consider what physical means the Creator chose to employ. The Bible itself informs us that the two factors involved were torrential rain, and the breaking up of the fountains of the 'Great Deep'. The incredible fall of rain, lasting 40 days, might suggest that the earth had run into some vast dust cloud or swarm of particles which, acting as nuclei, seeded the atmosphere for the production of very heavy rain. Even so, dramatic and terrifying as this must have been, it can only have produced a relatively small depth of water if it covered a very large area, and only a matter of inches if it covered the entire globe.

Plainly the major cause was the water coming from the oceans 'the Great Deep'. A flood produced by torrential rain in the Tigris valley or one produced by the overflow of Lake Van as was once suggested [22] would have swept the Ark out into the Persian gulf. The fact that it evidently floated northwards to the region of Ararat shows the greater effect of the oceanic contribution.

But all beyond this is speculation. Despite Morris and Whitcomb it seems far more likely that the bulk of the flood water was here already on the earth — the 'Great Deep' as the Bible tells us — and that it did not drop out of the sky. If so we can ask what moved this great mass of water over a vast tract of land. The melting of the world's ice-cap after the Glacial Period

might have produced enough water to raise the ocean level 300 feet above its former height, but such would probably have been a slow process. If the Flood was confined to the Tigris valley a large meteorite falling into the Persian Gulf [23] or a submarine earthquake in the same region [24] might be the cause. We could even consider larger meteorites, or earthquakes, in the Indian Ocean driving even bigger waves over the entire Middle East. The rise and fall of continents due to isostasy balancing of continental mass against underlying layers might also be considered. As Merson Davies, [25] an expert geologist, who believed in the Bible account of the Flood but not in Price's theories, says:- " If sea-beds can rise and continents sink there is no difficulty whatever in finding enough water even for a universal flood ". But again such movements are usually slow. Other suggestions have been made of a sudden slight shift in the earth's axis of rotation, due to an astral visitor coming near, or the slip of the polar ice-caps or some quicker than usual continental slip involving a small change in the earth's centre of gravity.

Only one thing emerges as certain for those who believe the Bible. Whatever the physical cause, it will never happen in that way again. We have the Divine guarantee that the earth will not experience such a catastrophe a second time. So perhaps, speaking scientifically, we have little hope of finding the cause of an unrepeatable event !

In conclusion let me attempt to bring together at least some of the views we have surveyed and offer a reconciliation to which a fairly large number would agree.

1. Noah's Flood was a real, historical event.
2. Noah's descendants carried the memory of it to the ends of the earth, but the Bible presents by far the simplest and clearest account.
3. The Bible account is a primary document in its own right.
4. The Flood was of considerable magnitude, no comparable flood having occurred since.

5. The date of this event lies between 10,000 and 3,000 B.C., with some probability that it lies nearer the 4,000 – 5,000 B.C. period than earlier.

6. Numerous causes can be suggested. None is at present satisfactory. The believer in the inspiration of the Bible would add his conviction that:

7. The Flood was a Divine judgment on a sinful race, given as a permanent lesson to mankind, and used by Christ as a solemn warning of a different but greater judgment yet to come.

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12. In a number of Flood stories throughout the world the cause is given as some form of divine judgment on human sin, e.g. the patience of the gods was exhausted (Lucian and other Greek writers) the gods were dissatisfied with men (Peru), people forgot to thank god (Nigeria), wickedness of men, (Zend Avesta, Bhagavat, China, Lolos, Polynesia, Guiana, Maori, etc.), the earth old and dirty requiring cleansing (Batak), men sunk in ignorance and luxury (Burma). Even Plato records that the Egyptian priests told him that it was because the gods wished to purify the earth that they brought the Flood.
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