

Some Thoughts on The Genesis Flood



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Introduction

Next to the creation account in Genesis 1–2, the section of scripture most often attacked by skeptics is the flood account in Genesis 6–8. The story of Noah and the ark is a favorite children’s story. The usual telling of the story is that the flood covered the whole world including the highest mountains. All life on earth, both human and animal, was destroyed except for the occupants of the ark. If we examine this account critically a number of questions arise. For example,

- How was Noah able to collect animals from every part of the globe?
- How would they all fit on the ark and how could he care for them all?
- What about animals that require a specific environment?
- What about animals that require a special diet? For example, some snakes only eat live food.
- Where did the tremendous amount of water come from?
- Where did it go after the flood?
- Since the flood would have mixed the waters, why are there still freshwater lakes?
- How did freshwater fish survive in salt water?
- How were the animals on the ark able to re-populate the whole earth?
- What did carnivores eat when they got off the ark?
- Why did some animals like kangaroos only end up in one area?

While I’m sure that God could produce a world-wide flood in a way that answered all these questions, I would like to explore if there is a simpler explanation. I have no doubt that this was a miraculous event, but does the Bible really say that the flood was world-wide? I will attempt to show that a local view of the flood is a legitimate interpretation of the Genesis flood account. I am not trying to convince those who hold a world-wide flood view to abandon that view, but I would like to show that there is evidence in both science and scripture, that seems to support a local flood view. Clearly, a local flood view would make the answering of the questions raised above much easier.

If you read the flood narrative in an English translation, it is hard to imagine anything but a global deluge. However, we must remember that this narrative was originally written in an ancient Hebrew language that is very different from English and was written to a people whose way of thinking is much different than ours. Ancient Hebrew had about 1% the number of words as present-day English. Thus, most Hebrew words had multiple meanings and could be translated into multiple English words. The correct translation depends on context, and the Ancient Hebrews lived in a world much different than ours. We will attempt to show that many of the Hebrew words used in the flood narrative could be legitimately translated into English words that point more to a local

flood than a global one. We will also look at other biblical passages outside Genesis that seem to point to a local flood. At the end I will present a limited sample of the Scientific evidence that argues against a global flood.

The limits of God's judgement

To understand the extent of the flood we must look at what God was trying to do. God's purpose for the flood is stated in Genesis 6.

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." Genesis 6:5–7

God's purpose for the flood was to destroy all humans because of their extreme depravity. There is evidence in Genesis that humans had not spread far from the birthplace of humanity but had remained in the regions of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. In Genesis 1–9 all the places mentioned belong to settlements in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf Oasis. From Genesis 10 onward we find places mentioned throughout the Eastern hemisphere. Thus, to destroy all humanity at that time it would only be necessary to flood Mesopotamia and nearby regions.

All is not always all

Phrases like "all the earth" and "every creature" occur frequently in the Genesis flood account. I will show that similar expressions are used in other parts of the Bible to describe "world-wide" events that are clearly not global. Here are some examples,

The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth. Genesis 41:57

However, it's clear that this verse only applies to those under Egypt's influence and not Alaska or Australia.

And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. 1 Kings 4:34

All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart. 1 Kings 10:24

However, it is clear from 1 Kings 4:31 and 2 Chronicles 9 that visitors came from as far away as Sheba (Ethiopia) and Arabia.

In the New Testament we find

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven.
Acts 2:5

Here ‘every nation under heaven’ is likely referring to all the provinces in the Roman and Parthian empires.

Hebrew for Earth and Heavens

The Phrase ‘all the earth’ occurs frequently in the flood narrative. The Hebrew corresponding to ‘all the earth’ is ‘kol erets.’ The Hebrew word ‘kol’ is usually translated as ‘all’ or ‘whole’, and the Hebrew word ‘erets’ can be translated as earth, land, country, and sometimes as the people of the land. In the tower of Babel story we find

Now the whole(kol) earth(erets) had one language and the same words. Genesis 11:1

Here ‘earth’ refers to people. In most cases ‘erets’ refers to a local geographical area and is usually best translated as ‘land.’ When we hear the word ‘earth’ we think of a large nearly spherical planet in a vast universe. It is doubtful that the early Hebrews had such a global view of the earth. To them the earth was likely the relatively flat land that they could see that extended from horizon to horizon. The phrase ‘kol erets’ occurs 205 times in the Old Testament. Of these, at most 40 refer to the entire earth. If you replace ‘earth’ by ‘land’ in the flood narrative, it takes on a much less global flavor.

There is evidence in the flood story itself where a global sounding phrase ‘face of the whole earth’ is used in a non-global sense. We read in the last part of the flood story:

And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen.
At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. Genesis 8:5–9

Notice that Noah could see the tops of mountains, but the waters were later ‘still on the face of the whole earth.’

Similarly, ‘under heaven’ can be translated as ‘under the sky’ and usually refers to what can be seen from horizon to horizon.

Here is an example where ‘under the whole heaven’ is used in a non-global sense

This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, Deuteronomy 2:25

Clearly, this only applies to those who have heard of or have encountered the Israelites.

Hebrew for Mountain

The Hebrew word that is translated in the flood narrative as ‘mountain’ is ‘har.’ It is used for small hills as well as high mountains. If you replace ‘mountain’ by ‘hill’ in the flood story, I think you will have a very different impression.

We often hear that the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. However, we read in Genesis 8:4 that the ark came to rest on the “mountains of Ararat” (plural). This term refers to a whole range that includes Mount Ararat as well as many smaller hills. The Bible doesn’t say where in this range the ark landed. However, we read in the flood story that

He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Genesis 8:10–11

We do know that olive trees don’t grow on high mountains.

One key verse used to support a global flood is

The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits (about 23 feet) Genesis 7:20

The above is how the verse was translated in the New International Version (NIV). In the New American Standard Bible (NASB) the same verse is translated differently as

The water prevailed fifteen cubits higher, and the mountains were covered. Genesis 7:20

The second translation sounds more reasonable since it would be difficult for Noah to know the height of the waters above the mountains whereas he could estimate the amount of rise by observing the water level relative to known features. As we have mentioned before, the word translated ‘mountains’ could be ‘hills.’

Evidence from other Bible passages

Let us now look at what other parts of the Bible have to say about the events in Genesis we are considering. Psalms 104 parallels the creation events in Genesis 1 using very poetic language. Here we read

*He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.
You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;
they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.
You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.* Psalms 104:5–9

As in Genesis 1 water initially covered the entire earth. Here God promises that water will never again cover the earth. This would seem to preclude a global flood. We find a Similar promise in Job 38

*Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt’?* Job 38:8–11

The apostle Peter referred twice to the flood in Genesis.

For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. 2 Peter 3:5-6

if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people,
2Peter 2:5

Here Peter seems to be limiting the flood by adding to ‘world’ the qualifiers ‘at that time’ and ‘ancient.’

Scientific Evidence

Scientists have not found any convincing evidence of a global flood. There is an article on Greenland ice cores in the journal *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith*[5] that provides strong evidence against a global flood. Here is the abstract from that paper

Recently an ice core nearly two miles long has been extracted from the Greenland ice sheet. The first 110,000 annual layers of snow in that ice core (GISP2) have been visually counted and corroborated by two to three different and independent methods as well as by correlation with volcanic eruptions and other datable events. Since the ice sheet would have floated away in the event of a global flood, the ice core is strong evidence that there was no global flood any time in the last 110,000 years.

In addition, a global flood would require more than four times the sum of all the water currently present in the Earth's oceans and lakes, in the Earth's atmosphere, and within the Earth's crust. The source of this water is a major problem for global flood adherents. The removal is also a problem. We read in Genesis 8

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided.
Genesis 8:1

A wind would be very effective in helping to move water away from a local area, but would have little effect on a global flood. There is nowhere for the water to go. The wind could speed up evaporation, but this would saturate the air and produce rain somewhere else.

What I have given here is only a small sample of the scientific difficulties facing a global flood view.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show that the correct translation of the Genesis flood narrative is not settled and that it could be translated in a way that is consistent with a local flood. Furthermore, there are biblical passages outside Genesis that seem to point to a local flood. Scientists have doubted the possibility of a global flood for a long time. I presented a few pieces of scientific evidence that argue against a local flood.

However, I would like to point out that scripture is clear that the flood was universal in the sense that all humans except those on the ark were destroyed by the flood. I just don't believe that the flood had to be global in order to accomplish this. I hope this discussion has been helpful in understanding this portion of scripture.

References

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