

Biblical Scholarship

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The Bible in ancient context

The Bible is a record of encounters between Almighty God and ordinary humans that lived thousands of years ago. As biblical scholar John Walton puts it, [the Bible was written for us all, but it was not written to us](#). Thus, for us to understand what Genesis means, we first need to understand what it meant to those who wrote and received it.

It was common practice in the ancient world to use an event (or memory of an event) and [retell it in a figurative way](#) to communicate a message to the hearers. There is good scriptural and historical evidence that the Flood story is an interpretation of an actual historical event retold in the rhetoric and theology of ancient Israel. The Genesis account is one of many stories of catastrophic floods in the ancient world, including the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, which bears striking similarities to the story of the Flood. This doesn't mean that Genesis 6-9 is borrowed from the stories of other cultures, but that it is based on a common cultural memory of a watery cataclysm.

The exact nature or date of this historical flood is not important to the meaning of the Genesis account, however, because the purpose of the biblical story is not to give a list of facts about that flood, but to communicate a message about God and humanity to the original hearers (and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to all God's people throughout history)

Interpreting the Flood story

The Genesis Flood story contains many literary clues that its writers (and original audience) were not intended to narrate an actual series of events. The story employs the literary device known as "hyperbole" throughout, describing a massive ark which holds representatives of "every living creature on Earth", and a flood which flows over the tops of the highest mountains in the world. These are not meant to challenge readers to figure out the practicality of such descriptions, but rather they are important clues that we are dealing with a theological story rather than ancient journalism.

There are other clues that the writers are not intending to relate a literal series of events. One is the command given to Noah to treat "clean" animals differently than "unclean" animals, even though those categories were not given to the Hebrew people until the time of Moses, much later in the biblical

story. Another clue about how to interpret the Flood story comes from its place in the book of Genesis and specifically in the “primeval narratives” of Genesis 1-11.

Biblical scholars almost universally see these chapters as having a different purpose than the rest of the book of Genesis. The primeval narratives cover a huge swath of cosmic history and are highly figurative in their language. They serve as the grand and poetic “introduction” to the story of God’s people which commences with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. While they speak of real events (such as the creation of the universe and the special calling of humankind), they do so in rhetorical and theological ways that have more to do with the purposes of the story than a plain narration of facts. This is completely typical of how ancient people (including the Israelites) wrote historical accounts, especially concerning “primeval” events near the beginning of history.

Ancient cosmology in the Flood story

Not only do we need to read the Flood story through the lens of ancient literature, but also ancient cosmology. Because the ancient Israelites (like all people in the ancient Near East) lacked telescopes, satellites, and other modern scientific equipment, they pictured the universe as it appeared to everyday observation. Ancient Near Eastern people thought that rain comes from an ocean above the sky (which explains why the sky is blue), and that this ocean wraps all the way around the earth (which explains why deep wells always hit water). They also thought of the “whole Earth” as simply the edges of their current maps, which mostly consisted of today’s Middle East.

The Flood narrative relies on this same ancient understanding of the world. As the “firmament” (a solid dome in the sky which holds the cosmic ocean in place) collapses and the “fountains of the deep” explode upward, the Earth experiences a cataclysmic return to the watery chaos described in Genesis 1:2. To deal with the chaos of sin, God returns the Earth to chaos, and then restores order with a “restart” and renewal of creation.

Modern people read the Flood story with a completely different perspective on the shape of the Earth and universe. Those who say the story portrays a “global” flood, for instance, are imposing that term upon the text, because the original audience had no idea that the Earth was a globe. Similarly, any speculation about the water sources or ark buoyancy or geologic effects or post-Flood animal migrations or similar questions is missing the point of the story.

The meaning of the Flood

To some, the view outlined here of the Flood account denies the divine inspiration of the text and instead makes the story entirely a human invention. But it’s important to remember that God chose to communicate his message through ordinary people, accommodating himself to their limited knowledge

in order to draw themselves to him. God did not give the ancient Israelites scientific data, nor did he give the Israelites new genres of literature.

The story of Noah, the Ark, and Flood speaks an inspired and powerful message about judgment and grace, that has instructed God's people throughout the ages about God's hatred of sin and his love for his creation. Most importantly, we see God's promise never to destroy the Earth again fully realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where God takes the judgment for sin upon himself rather than humanity. Thus, through the lens of Christ, the biblical Flood story proclaims the marvellous news of God's grace and love for his people.