

ARTICLES

THE FOUNTAINS OF THE GREAT DEEP

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The phrase “fountains of the great deep” as used in the Genesis flood account is both intriguing and significant. The author presents an analysis which gives insights into the original meaning of this expression.

Two passages in the Genesis flood story speak of “fountains (*maʿyenoṯh*) of the great deep.” The Hebrew term for “fountains” can be rendered into English either as “fountains”¹ or “springs”² of the “great deep” (Gen 7:11; 8:2). Some recent versions translate the expression “great deep” (*ʾēhôm rabbāh*) with “a great abyss.”³ These English translations reflect the oldest translation made from the Old Testament (i.e., the Septuagint), which translated this Hebrew word into Greek with *abyssos*, the English equivalent of which is “abyss.” The question has arisen whether the phrase “fountains of the great deep” refers to subterranean water or to the water of oceans. Could it possibly refer to both subterranean water and oceans?⁴ These questions require careful investigation of the Hebrew terminology and the sentence structure with due consideration of comparative Semitic philology.

The term *ʾēhôm* occurs in the Old Testament a total of 35 times of which 21 usages appear in the singular to which also the two passages in the Genesis flood story belong.⁵ It is noteworthy that this Hebrew word always appears without the article with the exception of two passages (Isa 63:16 [singular]; Psa 106:9 [plural]). *ʾēhôm* occurs for the first time in the Old Testament in Genesis 1:2 and is normally translated with “deep.” It refers to the world-ocean, an undifferentiated, unorganized, and passive state of the watery mass.⁶ Although there are several additional usages of the term *ʾēhôm* in the Pentateuch,⁷ let us consider its first usage in greater detail.

In Genesis 1:2 the word *ʾēhôm* “deep,” is the world-ocean. It is used as an expression to indicate that the entire world was covered with water. This agrees with a specific statement in Psalm 104:6: “Thou didst cover it [the earth] with the deep [*ʾēhôm*] as with a garment; the waters were standing above the mountains.” It is striking that the phrase “over the face

of the waters [*māyim*]” at the end of the second half of Genesis 1:2 corresponds and is used parallel to the concluding words of the first half of this verse, “upon the face of the deep.” This points clearly to the direction that in this verse the concepts of “deep” (*tēhôm*) and “waters” (*māyim*) express the same idea.⁸

It seems appropriate at this point to digress for a moment and investigate the cognate Semitic term *thm* (plural *thmt*, dual *thmtm*) in Ugaritic literature from about 1400 B.C.⁹ There are a number of Ugaritic texts in which the term *thm*, “deep” is found parallel to the term *ym*, “sea.” There is the parallel expression of the “edge of the sea [*yam*] and...edge of the ocean [*thm*].”¹⁰ This text equates “sea” (waters) with “ocean” (*thm* = *yam*). The same identification between “water” or “sea” and “deep” is found in Genesis 1:2; Job 28:14; 38:16; Jonah 2:6; Proverbs 8:27, 28. In another Ugaritic text one finds the phrase “a source of the rivers [*nhrm*]” in parallelism with the phrase “the channels of the deeps [*thmtm*].”¹¹ The context of this Ugaritic text indicates that the expression “the source of the rivers” refers to the waters that have their origin primarily from the rains which feed the rivers. The expression “the channels of the deeps” seems to refer to the upwelling of the waters from the earth. Another text from ancient Ugarit speaks of a 7-year drought “without dew, without showers, without the upsurgings of the deeps [*thmtm*].”¹² The “showers” are the waters from above, namely rain, and correspondingly “the upsurgings of the deeps” refer to the waters from below (*thmth*), namely the waters that gush forth from subterranean sources (cf. 2 Sam 1:21). In addition to the two evident meanings of *thm* in Ugaritic, namely ocean and subterranean waters, there is a third meaning completely unrelated. There is a text in which the term “wilderness” (*mdbr*) is balanced with “wasteland” (*thmt*).¹³ According to M. Dahood the same contrast is found in Psalm 78:15 between “wilderness” and “wasteland.” In short, in Ugaritic the term *thm* can mean 1) ocean, 2) subterranean waters, and 3) wasteland.

Let us turn our attention next to the various usages of the Hebrew term *tēhôm* (deep) in order to discover its range of meanings. This term appears in about one fourth of its usages in the Old Testament parallel to the word for “sea” (*yam*).¹⁴ In these instances the meaning of *tēhôm* seems to mean generally “waters” or “ocean” as a designation for a phenomenon in nature. To this particular range of meaning we have to assign also Job 38:30: “Water becomes hard like stone, and the surface of the deep (*tēhôm*) is imprisoned.” The idea of the Hebrew verb here translated “imprisoned” means “to become compacted,”¹⁵ i.e., it freezes. This means that “deep” (*tēhôm*) is something that is exposed to the elements of nature

and its surface can freeze like water. There seems to be no doubt about the fact that “deep” here means a body of water such as an ocean. Furthermore, the “deep/waters/ocean” is God’s creature which can give praise to Him (Psa 42:8; 148:7), tremble at His command (Hab 3:10), or can lament (Ezek 31:15).

There are a number of passages in which the term *tehôm* designates the Red Sea of the Exodus event when the Israelites crossed the sea (Exod 15:5, 8; Isa 51:10; 63:16; Psa 106:9). In these contexts it simply means “deep waters” normally impassable to men and horses (cf. Psa 135:6).¹⁶

Finally, we have to discuss the passages in which the word *tehôm* refers to “subterranean water.”¹⁷ In Deuteronomy 8:7 Moses describes the good land of Canaan as a land of water-brooks, fountains, and springs (literally “deeps” = *tehômôth*) which had their sources in valleys and hills. This is a description of land watered by means of wells which are fed by subterranean water. In Ezekiel 31:4 the picture is drawn of *tehôm* pouring its streams round about the place where the cedar was planted and sending out brooks to all the trees of the field. *Tehôm* is used here to signify the source or starting point of the rivers and channels and seems to refer to the subterranean waters.¹⁸

Having surveyed the various meanings of the word *tehôm*, we can now return to our text in Genesis 7:11. The term *tehôm* is here joined with the adjective *rabbāh* which means “great.”¹⁹ It is the regular adjective applied to *tehôm* in the Old Testament. As examples we may cite the following: Isaiah 51:10: “Was it not Thou who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep (*tehôm rabbāh*)”; Amos 7:4: “And it consumed the great deep (*tehôm rabbāh*) and began to consume the land”; Psalm 36:6 (Heb 6:7): “Thy judgments are like a great deep (*tehôm rabbāh*)”; cf. Psalm 78:15. It appears that the phrase *tehôm rabbāh* became a compound noun and was stereotyped and therefore always used without the definite article.²⁰

This view finds support by the usage of the verb form *bāqa^c* which means in the Niphal form in which it appears in Genesis 7:11 “to split, to burst, to break forth.”²¹ This verb is found frequently in Biblical literature in connection with the bringing forth of water. In Psalm 74:15 one reads “Thou didst break open (*bāqa^c*) springs and torrents.” According to the context this seems to mean that God split open the earth so that waters could come forth which could feed the springs of rivers. In Exodus 14:16 Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea and divided (*bāqa^c*) it. The idea is a splitting apart of the waters. According to Judges 15:19 God “split open” (*bāqa^c*) the hollow place and water came from it. In Isaiah

48:21 it is stated that He “cleft” (*bāqaʿ*) the rock and waters gushed out. In these verses the same verb appears as in Genesis 7:11 and has consistently the meaning of bursting forth, dividing, cleaving, splitting open. On the basis of these and other passages,²² it appears safe to suggest that in Genesis 7:11 the meaning of “burst forth” refers to a breaking open of the crust of the earth to let subterranean waters pour out in unusual quantity. Accordingly the whole clause “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth” may be taken to refer to the fountains, which in normal times furnished sufficient water for the needs of men and animals and the irrigation of the fields. At the beginning of the flood these fountains burst open and poured out such terrific quantities of water which together with the water raining down from the heavens brought about the flood which destroyed all life on earth.

This interpretation, based upon the study of the designation “great deep” and the term “burst forth,” is further supported by the parallelism of the clause in the second part of Genesis 7:11. The writer has used a classic chiasmic structure which is well attested in Hebrew literature. It may be translated literally as follows:

There burst forth all the fountains of the great deep, and the windows of the heavens were opened.

The words “burst forth” correspond to the words “were opened” and the expression “the fountains of the great deep” corresponds to the “windows of the heavens.” This chiasmic parallelism indicates that the waters below the ground came forth as the waters above the ground broke loose.²³

In short, on the basis of comparative philology and the Hebrew terminology as used in Genesis 7:11 and 8:2 as well as consideration of the literary structure of 7:11, it appears that the bursting forth of the waters from the fountains of the “great deep” refers to the splitting open of springs of subterranean waters with such might and force that together with the torrential down-pouring of waters stored in the atmospheric heavens a worldwide flood comes about.

ENDNOTES

1. King James Verson, Revised Standard Version, New Jewish Version, New American Bible, New American Standard Bible, Anchor Bible.
2. New English Bible. This is also suggested by: Koehler L, Baumgartner W. 1952. Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros (Leiden), p 547; Holladay W, Jr., editor.

1970. A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI), p 206; Fohrer G, editor. 1973. Hebrew and Aramaic dictionary of the Old Testament, translated by. W. Johnstone (Berlin-NY), p 154.
3. New English Bible, New American Bible.
 4. This is suggested by E. S. Booth and H. G. Coffin. 1969. Creation: accident or design? (Washington DC), p 52, 55.
 5. Genesis 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; 49:25; Deuteronomy 33:15; Job 28:14; 38:16, 30; 41:24; Psalm 36:7; 42:8; 104:6; Proverbs 8:27, 28; Ezekiel 26:19; 31:4, 15; Isaiah 51:10; Amos 7:4; Jonah 2:6; Habakkuk 3:10.
 6. For a discussion of the term *ʾēhôm* in Genesis 1:2 and its relationship to ancient Near Eastern materials, see: Hasel GF. 1972. The significance of the cosmology in Genesis 1 in relation to ancient Near Eastern parallels. Andrews University Seminary Studies 10:4-7, where additional literature is cited.
 7. Genesis 7:11; 8:2; 49:25; Exodus 15:5, 8; Deuteronomy 8:7; 33:15.
 8. Cassuto U. 1964, Genesis (Jerusalem) vol. I, p 25; Westermann C. 1973. Genesis (Neukirchen-Vluyn), p 145; and many others. Precisely the same parallelism between these terms is reflected in Job 24:10; Proverbs 8:27; and Jonah 2:6.
 9. For secondary literature see: Hasel GF. 1972. The significance of the cosmology in Genesis 1 in relation to ancient Near Eastern parallels. Andrews University Seminary Studies 10:5, n 22.
 10. This translation is taken from: T. H. Gaster TH. 1950. Thespis (NY), p 249. The Ugaritic text is found in: Gordon CH. 1965. Ugaritic textbook (Rome), Text 52:30.
 11. For another translation, see: Pritchard JB, editor. 1955. Ancient Near Eastern texts (New Haven), p 133. The text is found in: Gordon, Ugaritic textbook, Text 51:iv, 20.
 12. The text is published in Gordon, Ugaritic textbook, 1 Aqht 45; cf. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern texts, p 153.
 13. Gordon, Ugaritic textbook, No. 2001:3-5; “*tlk mdr...thdtm w hl...w tgl tthmt.*” Cf. Dahood M. 1968. Psalms II “Anchor Bible” (Garden City, NY), p 240.
 14. Genesis 1:2; Job 28:14; 38:16; Psalm 33:7; 107:23; 135:6; Isaiah 51:10; Jonah 2:6; Habakkuk 3:10.
 15. Koehler & Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros, p 482; Fohrer, Hebrew and Aramaic dictionary of the Old Testament, p 133.
 16. Jackson JJ. 1962. The deep. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville), vol. I, p 813.
 17. Koehler & Baumgartner, Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros, p 387.
 18. Keil CF. 1956. Commentary on the Old Testament: Ezekiel, Daniel (Grand Rapids, MI), vol. II, p 31.
 19. Holladay, A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament, p 330.
 20. Cassuto U. 1964. Genesis (Jerusalem), vol. II, p 85.
 21. Holladay, A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament, p 46.
 22. Exodus 14:21; Isaiah 35:6; 43:12; Psalm 78:13, 15; Proverbs 3:20; Job 28:10; Nehemiah 9:11.

23. Among those who recognize two lines of poetry in the second half of 7:11 are:
Jacob B. 1943. *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin), p 205f.; Orlinsky HM.
1969. *Notes on the new translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia), p 76; Speiser EA.
1964. *Genesis* (Garden City, NY), p 48; and others.