

ARTICLES

SOME ISSUES REGARDING THE NATURE AND UNIVERSALITY OF THE GENESIS FLOOD NARRATIVE

Gerhard F. Hasel

*Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology
Andrews University*

WHAT THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT

Because the Genesis flood account does not provide many details about the events described, various theories have been proposed, and much speculation has caused diversity of opinion. To better understand the original meaning of the Genesis flood narrative, Dr. Hasel presents an exegetical study of three of its phrases.

While some commentators interpret the phrase “all flesh” in Genesis 6:12, 13 to refer to all living beings (both men and animals), others restrict “all flesh” to just mankind. “All flesh” appears in the Old Testament about 46 times, 13 of which are given in the Genesis flood account. An exegetical study of the overall use of this term reveals that it can mean the “whole body,” “all living creatures,” “all mankind,” or just “animals.” A contextual analysis of the 13 usages in the Genesis flood narrative shows that “all flesh” in Genesis 6:12, 13 denotes “all living beings.” Further support for this conclusion is given by an exegetical study of the terms “violence,” “way,” and “corruption.”

The use of the Hebrew term “mabbûl” to describe the Genesis flood has been thought to mean “heavenly ocean” rather than “flood and deluge.” Investigation shows the arguments for this theory to be unconvincing and, instead, it appears that “mabbûl” is consistently used to describe the deluge caused by both torrential rains and the bursting forth of subterranean waters.

In the final section of this paper, Dr. Hasel examines the two verses (Gen 8:3, 5) describing the receding of the waters at the end of the flood. In Genesis 8:3a, the idea is that the waters “returned” to their upper and lower spheres from which they came. The description in verses 3b and 5 indicate a gradual diminishing of the waters over a period of time, with a continuous movement somewhat like tidal activity, caused by the wind.

The account of the flood as given in Genesis is brief, and many different interpretations have been given to the events described therein. Three expressions used in that narrative will be analyzed below in an attempt to show their original meaning.

I. THE CORRUPTION OF “ALL FLESH” IN THE GENESIS FLOOD ACCOUNT

The subject of discussion under this heading deals with the question of what the phrase “all flesh” (*kol-bāsār*) means in Genesis 6:12, 13. Does it refer to the totality of mankind only or does it include all living beings, i.e., men and animals? Some commentators restrict the phrase *kol-bāsār* to mankind only.¹ There are equally prestigious commentators that suggest that the phrase *kol-bāsār* in this passage (Gen 6:12f) refers to the world of men and animals.² In view of this divergence of opinion a careful investigation of the meaning of this phrase is mandatory.

The Hebrew term for “flesh” is *bāsār*³ and appears 270 times in the Old Testament. There are three usages of the Aramaic cognate in the Old Testament (Dan 2:11; 4:9; 7:5). An overview of the usages of the Hebrew term “flesh” in the Old Testament reveals that it is employed both with reference to mankind and also with reference to animals.⁴ Although an investigation of the Hebrew term *bāsār* is of great significance for a general understanding of the concept of “flesh” in the Old Testament, the usage of the phrase “all flesh” is more crucial for an understanding of the meaning of this expression in Genesis 6:12, 13. It is, therefore, advisable to restrict our investigation to the meaning of this formula in the Old Testament. The formula “all flesh” (*kol-bāsār*) appears in the Old Testament about 46 times.⁵ It is remarkable that 13 usages of the expression “all flesh” appear in the flood narrative (Gen 6:5 - 9:17).⁶ The majority of recent translations render this Hebrew phrase in these 12 instances consistently with “all flesh” (Revised Standard Version, New Jewish Bible, Jerusalem Bible, New American Standard Bible, Anchor Bible), but some recent versions use a variety of renderings.⁷ It should be noted that the expression “all flesh” appears in the Old Testament for the first time in the passage under discussion (Gen 6:12, 13) which makes it especially tantalizing.

Our first attention shall be placed upon the scope of the phrase “all flesh” throughout the Old Testament, leaving aside for a moment the employment of this expression in the flood narrative of Genesis. The phrase “all flesh” can refer to the “whole body” of man (Lev 13:13; Num 9:7) or animals (Lev 4:11; cf. 17:11, 14; Job 41:15). The emphasis in these texts rests upon “all flesh” in terms of the entire body in contrast to bones, skin, entrails, etc. In Proverbs 4:22 “all flesh” also refers to the “whole body” (New American Standard Bible).⁸

The second range of meaning of the phrase “all flesh” includes men and animals, namely “all living beings.”⁹ In Numbers 18:15 reference is made to the first-born of “man or animal” which is summarized by the expression “all flesh.” This explicit statement designates “all flesh” to include “men and animals.” In both Numbers 16:22 and 27:16 Moses addressed God as “God of the spirits of all flesh.” In this epithet, as applied to God, Moses appeals to the God of all creation. It is evident that with the expression “all flesh” Moses refers to all creatures, both men and animals, and confesses that God is the Creator and Preserver of all creatures and gave and still gives life and breath to “all flesh.”¹⁰ The author of Job expresses the idea that if God should gather together His spirit and breath “all flesh would perish together” (Job 34:15). The idea is again that God is the Giver of breath and the spirit of life to all perishable created beings. The Psalmist gives thanks to the “God of heaven” (Ps136:26) and testifies to Him as his God whose grace endures forever. He describes Him as the God of creation and history and praises Him for giving “food to all flesh” (v 25). As the Creator He feeds all living creatures which includes men and animals.¹¹ There are also several statements in the prophetic writings

which contain the usage of “all flesh” with reference to all living beings or creatures.

There are passages in which the scope of the phrase “all flesh” has still a meaning other than the two discussed thus far. It can be used in the sense of “all men,” i.e., the whole human race or all mankind. The author of Job contrasts “the life of every living thing” with the “breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10, New American Standard Bible). Literally the last phrase in Hebrew reads “all the flesh of man.”¹² The Psalmist comes to speak of God’s abundant favor to earth and man, expressing his conviction that God hears prayer and that to him comes “all flesh” (Ps 65:2, [3]). There can hardly be any doubt about the meaning of the phrase “all flesh” because it is used here in connection with prayer and appears therefore to refer to men.¹³ In Psalm 145:21 the writer unites his personal testimony in praising God with a mandate that “all flesh will bless his holy name.” The ultimate purpose aims in asking the whole body of “all flesh” to join in the praise of God.

In discussing the remaining passages which speak of “all flesh,” we may turn first to Joel 2:28 (Heb 3:1) where God gives the great promise of the outpouring of His Spirit upon “all flesh.” What does “all flesh” mean here? It certainly does not mean “all living creatures,” men and animals, because the result of the outpouring of the Spirit of God is described in the following phrases in terms of prophesying, dreaming dreams, and seeing visions which are activities restricted to men. Some interpreters seek to understand this phrase in a very narrow sense as referring to everyone in Israel.¹⁴ But this does not seem necessary. The phrase “all flesh” appears to have a broader connotation. We must keep in mind that in Genesis 6:3 God threatens that He will no longer let His Spirit rule the human race because it has become “flesh” (*bāśār*). The association of “flesh” with the “Spirit of the Lord” indicates that the restriction of the expression “all flesh” merely to the members of the literal Israel is too narrow. It has been said that the word “all” in this phrase does away with the limitation to one particular nation and that Joel 2:29, 30 does not exhaust the idea of “all flesh.”¹⁵ Taking into consideration also the fulfillment of this prophecy at Pentecost where Peter quoted the Joel passage and applied it to the Christian Church — with a richer outpouring yet to be expected — we come to recognize that the expression “all flesh” refers to men generally in terms of members of spiritual Israel as well as literal Israel.¹⁶ In Zechariah 2:13 (Heb 2:17) the expression “all flesh” refers to mankind (cf. Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7).¹⁷ It is often suggested that the phrase “all flesh” in Isa 40:5f; 49:26; 66:23f; Ezek 20:4, 9f refers to mankind as a whole.¹⁸ While this may well be true, it is difficult to be certain in all instances. We may well ask with L. Köhler, when “all flesh” shall see that it is God who acts (Ezek 20:4), when “all flesh” shall see the glory of God (Isa 40:5), when “all flesh” shall know that the Lord has drawn forth His sword out of its sheath (Ezek 21:5), does “all flesh” mean indeed only man, or does it mean man and animals together?¹⁹ If one considers Romans 8:22, an absolute answer cannot be easily provided.

The expression “all flesh” in the Old Testament (outside the 13 usages of this expression in the Genesis flood account) is used to mean at times: a) the whole body of either man or animals; b) sometimes all living beings, namely both men and animals; and c) sometimes all men.²⁰

Let us turn our attention to an investigation of the 13 usages of the expression “all flesh” in the Genesis flood account. Leaving aside for the moment the crucial passage of Genesis 6:12, 13, we turn next to the expression “all flesh” in verse 17. Here God expresses His plan to bring the flood upon the earth in order to destroy “all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish” (New American Standard Bible). It is recognized by all commentators alike that the expression “all flesh” in this passage refers to men and animals. The same meaning of the phrase “all flesh,” namely referring to men and animals, appears again in Genesis 9:11: “And all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood” (New American Standard Bible).

It is especially noteworthy that in the covenant scene of Genesis 9:9ff, God emphasizes again and again that “all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood” (v 11, 15b). The expression “all flesh” refers again to both men and animals. This means that when God looks back to the destruction that has come upon the earth He speaks of “all flesh” in terms of the whole world of living creatures. This may have a bearing on the first appearance of this expression in Genesis 6:12, 13, to which we shall return later.

In the same covenant scene we find two times the expression of God making a covenant “between me and you [Noah] and every living creature of all flesh” (Gen 9:15a, 16). It is noteworthy that in both of these phrases the preposition *b^e* is used before the phrase “all flesh.” The preposition *b^e*, literally “in,” is in these instances explicative,²¹ and can be rendered by the word “comprising”²² or “namely” or “that is.” This means that this particular clause may be translated more properly: “between me and you and every living creature, comprising (namely, that is) all flesh.”²³ Thus it follows that “all flesh” refers to both men and animals. That this is the clear intention of the text is supported by 9:17 which speaks of the establishing of the covenant “between men and all flesh that is on earth.” “All flesh” is used here comprehensively to include every living being, namely men and animals. The meaning of the expression “all flesh” in the passages discussed so far in the Genesis flood narrative coincides with a usage of this phrase in other parts of the Old Testament.

Let us discuss the remaining passages in the Genesis flood account. They reveal another usage of the expression “all flesh” which we have not yet encountered in the Old Testament. From Genesis 6:19 it is clear that Noah receives the command to take some of the animals into the ark to keep them alive, namely birds, animals, creeping things, which are summarized in the phrase “every living thing of all flesh.” In this instance the expression “all flesh” refers only to animals. The restricted sense of “all flesh” as referring to animals alone appears also in 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17.

What perished according to Genesis 7:21 was “all flesh that moved on the earth of (*b^e*) birds and of (*b^e*) cattle and of (*b^e*) beasts and of (*b^e*) every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth, and all men.” This literal translation seeks to bring out an aspect usually overlooked. The expression “all flesh” is here clearly limited in that it includes only the enumerated kinds of animals. The function of the preposition *beth* is used to specify which kinds of animals are destroyed by the flood.²⁴ The writer of the flood account wanted to specify clearly the constituents of the animal world that perished in the flood. He attempted to exclude the water creatures which belonged to “all flesh” but would not perish in the flood.

It has become apparent that the expression “all flesh” in the Genesis flood narrative (aside from 6:12,13) expresses either the notion of all living beings, including men and animals, or is used merely with reference to animals, excluding water creatures. It is to be noted that a fourth major meaning for the expression “all flesh,” namely animals on land, has become apparent which is so far not encountered anywhere in the Old Testament.²⁵ It now remains for us to return to the initial question whether the expression “all flesh” in Genesis 6:12, 13 refers to “men and animals” or just to “men.” On the basis of the investigation of the expression “all flesh” in the Old Testament and in the Genesis flood narrative it has been shown that this expression can refer to: a) a body of men and animals;²⁶ b) all living beings, including men and animals; c) all men, i.e., the whole of mankind; and d) the whole animal kingdom. It is striking that in the flood account only two of the four usages appear, namely “all living beings,” including men and animals, and just “animals.” The latter usage does not appear again anywhere in the Old Testament. It is also striking that the expression “all flesh” with the meaning of men or mankind is not used anywhere in the Pentateuch.²⁷ On the basis of these observations it seems sound to suggest that the expression “all flesh” in 6:12, 13 denotes “all living beings,” namely men and animals, and is so used in six of the other occurrences in the flood account.²⁸ This interpretation is consistent with the other usages of this expression in the flood account.

There are a number of additional considerations which lend support to this view. In Genesis 6:3 the Lord says that His Spirit (*rūah*) shall not abide (*yādon*)²⁹ with man “inasmuch as he is also flesh.”³⁰ The term “flesh” here refers to “man” in the generic sense.³¹ It seems that since “flesh” refers in 8:3 to “man” that the expression “all flesh” in 6:12, 13 would mean more than just “man.” This consideration supports the suggestion that “all flesh” in 6:12, 13 refers to “all living beings,” namely men and animals.

Another consideration is in place at this point. After the flood when God has destroyed men and animals from the face of the earth by the waters of the flood, God makes a covenant with “every living creature” (*kol-nepheš ḥayyāh*), an expression found three times in Genesis 9.³² The repeated use of “all flesh”³³ indicates the universal application of the promise to “all living beings” of both men and animals “on the earth” (9:14, 16, 17). The fact that God established a covenant between Himself and every living

creature of “all flesh” (9:17) seems to indicate that both men and animals are also included in the identical phrase “all flesh” at the opening of the flood account. There seems to be an arc of connection between the continued life of every living being after the flood and the expression “all flesh” used in the beginning of the flood account (Gen 6:12, 13) where God speaks of its destruction as also in Genesis 9:15b which refers in its context to “all living creatures” of man and animals. This is further supported by the fact that in both 6:13 and 9:15 the Hebrew verb “to destroy” (*šāḥat*) is employed. These links indicate the same meaning for the same expression in 6:13 and 9:15, 17.

On account of the foregoing arguments it is fairly certain that the expression “all flesh” in 6:13 embraces indeed both men and animals. This is conceded even by some of those who would like to admit this meaning in 6:13 but would not allow it in 6:12.³⁴

If the expression “all flesh” in Genesis 6:13 includes both men and animals, then it would seem to follow that the phrase “for the earth is filled with violence because of them” in the same verse would also have to refer to both men and animals. It has been objected that “all flesh” could not refer to “all living beings” because the Hebrew term for “violence” (*ḥāmās*) is used in the Old Testament only in connection with man.³⁵ It seems true that in the Old Testament this noun is used only in connection with man.³⁶ Whereas the regular meaning of this Hebrew word is “violence, wrong,”³⁷ it has been pointed out that this term makes reference to wickedness generally, to unrighteousness as a whole.³⁸ This noun is used in the Old Testament a total of only 59 times³⁹ and may therefore not give the total range of the usage of this word. The verb form, derived from the same root, appears several times in the Old Testament with the meaning “to treat violently” (Jer 22:3; Ezek 22:26; Zech 3:4; Prov 8:36) and is used also in connection with beings other than men (Job 15:33; Lam 2:6).⁴⁰ There may be, then, an indication here that the noun “violence” may also have broader connotations, although these do not often appear in other passages of the Old Testament. Let us look at one example.

The prophet Jonah says that “both men and beasts” are to take part in the mourning by being covered with sackcloth; both are to “call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from their violence (*ḥāmās*) which is in their hands” (Jonah 3:8). The context shows clearly that “man and beast” is the subject of this clause and that beasts, therefore, along with men can have part in “violence” (*ḥāmās*).⁴¹ No objection should be taken to the word “hands” as indicating that the “violence” can refer only to the wrong actions of men, because the Hebrew term for “hand” is *kaph* and used for both the “hand” and “foot” of man as well as the “foot” of a dove (Gen 8:9) and the “paws” of a quadruped (Lev 11:27).⁴² In short, the Hebrew term for “violence, wrong” (*ḥāmās*) can be used in connection with “men and animals” as is clearly indicated by Jonah 3:8. This means that the argument used by C. Westermann that “violence” is used only in

connection with men⁴³ and that therefore the expression “all flesh” must be restricted to men is without force.

We cannot be certain as to the “violence” of the animals, because we do not have sufficient information from the Old Testament which would indicate clearly what it could refer to in the animal world. Some of the wrongs, transgressions, and sins expressed by the word “violence” in the Old Testament generally include the shedding of blood⁴⁴ and likely sexual aberrations (Jer 13:22) which defile the land (Lev 18:58; 20:22) and are to be punished by death (Lev 20:11-18). It is possible that these usages of “violence” give us a hint of the kinds of corruption in the animal world.

The writer of the biblical flood account wrote in Genesis 6:12: “And God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” It seems that on the basis of the context⁴⁵ the meaning of “all flesh” in this verse is the same as in the following verse, namely “men and animals.”⁴⁶ This interpretation is supported by the fact that the expression “all flesh” in the Genesis flood narrative already refers seven times to “men and animals” (Gen 6:17; 9:11, 15a, 15b, 16, 17; 6:13) and that it otherwise refers only to “animals” (6:19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17). Since the meaning “animals” does not possibly fit into the context of this verse, the meaning “men and animals” seems the only other consistent choice. This is further supported by the fact that in 6:3 the term “flesh” specifically means mankind and that the more comprehensive designation “all flesh” would point to the inclusion of living creatures beyond the class of man.

The major argument advanced against the suggestion that in Genesis 6:12 the expression “all flesh” cannot include both men and animals rests upon the dating of the particular passages in the Genesis flood narrative in which this expression occurs (cf. Hulst, Westermann). Critical scholars customarily date this to the so-called Priestly (P) document which was supposedly written in the post-exilic period somewhere in the 5th century B.C.⁴⁷

We do not agree with the hypothetical source division and redating of the Genesis flood narrative.⁴⁸ “If we examine the section of the Flood without bias and pay heed to its finished structure,...it becomes apparent that the section in its present form cannot possibly be the outcome of the synthesis of fragments culled from various sources; or from such a process there could not have emerged a work so beautiful and harmonious in all its parts and details.”⁴⁹ Those maintaining a source division of the Genesis flood narrative claim that the respective passages with the expression “all flesh” come from a late period (ca. 5th century B.C.). Thus, according to one commentator, “the most important argument” is that the term “all flesh” in prophetic writings “appears in connection with guilt and judgment and always means only men.”⁵⁰ This “most important argument” has cogency only on account of the redating of the Genesis flood narrative sections. If no such late date is proven for the sections, then this argument loses its force altogether.

The other argument advanced in favor of the position that the expression “all flesh” in Genesis 6:12 does not include animals is based upon the phrase “corrupted their way.” This phrase is said to be “applicable to man alone.”⁵¹ This raises the question whether the verb “to corrupt” and the noun “way” are restricted in their usages only to men.

Let us turn our attention to the qualifying object “way” in order to see whether or not “only a moral being can corrupt its way.”⁵² The Hebrew noun which is generally translated as “way” appears in the Old Testament 706 times.⁵³ This term can be rendered in English as “way, path, journey, undertaking, business, manner, custom, conduct, behavior, situation, strength.”⁵⁴ It is by no means true that the noun “way” is used only in connection with man. Proverbs 30:19 speaks of “the way of an eagle” and “the way of a snake.” In the same text reference is made also of “the way of a man with a woman” and in v 20 of “the way of an adulteress.” In the last two instances the word “way” is used in connection with normal sexual relations between man and woman (v 19) and even illicit sexual relations (v 20).⁵⁵ It may be possible that the expression “way of an eagle” can in this context refer to more than just the flight of a bird of prey. The same may be supposed for “the way of the snake” which may refer to more than just the gliding of a snake over a rock. In each case the “way” of the respective animal’s sexuality may also be referred to. It appears that the word “way” can be used as a metaphor for sexual relations.⁵⁶ If the noun “way” is used in the Old Testament as a metaphor for sexual relations, then could this mean that in Genesis 6:12 the corruption of the way of all flesh refers among other things to transgressions in the sphere of sexual relations between man and man, animal and animal, and man and animal?

It is evident, then, that the word “way” is not consistently restricted to man, as some have claimed (Keil, Leupold), but is indeed used in the Old Testament also in connection with animals (cf. Jon 3:8). The noun *derek* in Genesis 6:12 could accordingly be translated very properly with “conduct” or “behavior.”⁵⁷ It is a word that sums up the entire sphere of conduct, behavior and manner of life which had been corrupted by “all flesh,” namely men and animals.

The Hebrew verb that expresses the idea of corruption derives from the Hebrew stem *šht* and occurs 5 times in Genesis 6 (v11, 12 [twice], 13, 17) and twice in Genesis 9 (v11, 15). The very fact that we find this verb used 3 times in 6:11, 12 indicates that great emphasis is placed upon the idea expressed by it.⁵⁸ This is in harmony with the emphasis explicitly placed upon the great wickedness on “earth” that was mentioned several times before (6:5, 11). The corruption of the “earth” means the corruption of “all flesh.”

The emphasis on the corruption of all flesh seems to be intended as a definite contrast to the account of creation. In Genesis 1:31 it is stated “and God saw” which is followed by the appraisal of the divine inspection which resulted in the verdict, “it was very good.” The same opening phrase “and God saw (looked)” appears here in Genesis 6:12, and what He witnessed

now was the complete opposite, the corruption of all flesh on earth. The world as it emerged from the hands of the Creator was exceedingly good, but now, because of the conduct and behavior of all flesh, it was corrupt. Already in Genesis 1 we find a close association between men and animals in that the animals were created on the same day on which God created man (v 24ff). The same close association between man and animals appears in Genesis 2 where both men and animals were formed from the dust of the ground (v 7, 19).⁵⁹ The corruption of their “way” seems to include also sexual deviation as we have pointed out above. It has been shown that sexual deviations are also included in the universal corruption of mankind⁶⁰ and as 6:2 indicates where “the sons of God saw the daughters...and they took wives for themselves, whomever they choose.” The first part of this verse indicates intermarriage. It has been suggested that the phrase “whomever they choose” implies polygamy⁶¹ and other sexual sins.⁶²

The Hebrew verb “to corrupt” is used of animals as well as of man. In 1 Samuel 6:5 reference is made to mice which are said “to corrupt the earth,” using also the Hiphil form of the verb as in Genesis 6:12. This means that the claim that the phrase “corrupted their way” is applicable to man alone⁶³ cannot be upheld, because both the verb “to corrupt” is used with an animal as its subject (1 Sam 6:5) and the noun “way” is also used in connection with animals (Prov 30:19f).

On the basis of the foregoing evidence it seems safe to conclude that the expression “all flesh” in Genesis 6:12, 13 refers comprehensively to “men and animals.” To speak in terms of Genesis 6:7, “all flesh” included “man and beast and creeping things and flying creatures of the air.” The phrase “all flesh” is a summary expression of all living beings on earth which have “corrupted their way.” The corruption was universal and should not be restricted to man, for the latter had moral implications. Among the transgressions that corrupted all living beings were apparently also various deviations in the sphere of sexuality.

II. THE TERM *MABBÛL* (FLOOD) IN THE GENESIS FLOOD ACCOUNT

The Hebrew term for the catastrophe described in the Genesis flood account is *mabbûl*, occurring everywhere in the flood account with the definite article⁶⁴ with the exception of two instances.⁶⁵ This usage suggests that for the ancient Hebrews this term was a well-known entity to which water belonged (Gen 6:17; 7:7). Its only other appearance in the Old Testament is Psalm 29:10. In the apocrypha it appears in Sirach 44:17.

The various theories that trace the Hebrew word *mabbûl* back to an Akkadian original have generally been given up and can be said to have been soundly refuted.⁶⁶

In 1928 the suggestion was made that the Hebrew term *mabbûl* means in several passages “heavenly ocean” (Gen 6:17; 7:6, 7, 10, 17; Ps 29:10), whereas in other passages it simply means “flood, deluge” (Gen 9:11, 15, 28; 10:1, 32; 11:10; cf. Sir 44:17).⁶⁷ There are two primary arguments for this

distinction: a) It is based upon the separation of the Genesis flood account into two basic documents (P and J), each of which is interpreted by itself without reference to the other and then the differences are used to arrive at the distinction of these terms. For example, it is claimed that in the so-called P document God announced to Noah His intention at the beginning to bring the *mabbûl* of waters upon the earth (6:17). Accordingly it is claimed that the new thing for Noah obviously is not the well-known *mabbûl*, but the announcement of its being brought upon the earth. On this basis it is assumed that Noah knows very well what a *mabbûl* is. On the other hand, in the J document, Noah to begin with learns only God's intention to destroy the earth with water and only later is a first mention made of the *mabbûl* (7:10).⁶⁸ b) The other major argument rests on the usage of the only other biblical text in the Old Testament in which the designation *mabbûl* appears, namely Psalm 29:10.

With regard to the first argument we would like to point out that the source division of the Genesis flood narrative is entirely hypothetical and artificial. Therefore, no real case can be built upon such a division with regard to the meaning of this Hebrew term. A careful reading of the context of the first appearance of the word *mabbûl* in the Genesis flood narrative will throw much light upon the meaning of this term. The traditional translation of Genesis 6:17 is "For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth" (Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible). This traditional rendering has obscured the fact that the Hebrew reads *eth-ha-mabbûl mayim*. The fact that the article is used with the object *mabbûl* indicates that the word "waters" is not considered to be the genitive of the word "flood" (*mabbûl*) as the traditional renderings indicate.⁶⁹ This means that the words "waters upon the earth" are in apposition to the word "flood" (*mabbûl*).⁷⁰ A literal translation of this clause in Genesis 6:17 will therefore read, "And behold, I myself am bringing the flood — waters upon the earth — to destroy all flesh."⁷¹ The appositional phrase "waters upon the earth" is not a later addition but necessary in this context.⁷² In other words, Noah is being told that the *mabbûl* would be made up of the waters that cover the earth. Earlier God had revealed to Noah that He would destroy the earth (6:13); now Noah is told that the destruction comes by a "flood" (*mabbûl*), namely by means of "waters upon the earth."

There is no hint anywhere in the biblical flood narrative that the flood comes by means of the ocean. On the contrary, the flood is said to come by torrential rains and violent outbursts of subterranean waters. Contextually the waters of which the "flood" (*mabbûl*) did consist of is made up of "rain" (7:12) and "the fountains of the deep" (7:11; 8:2), the subterranean waters. This indicates clearly that with the term *mabbûl* reference is made to all the waters that came upon the earth and as such should be understood as a "flood" by waters of a "deluge."⁷³ This conclusion is further supported through the later expression "waters of Noah" (Isa 54:9) which is used for the "flood." In the Genesis narrative itself the flood is many times referred to as "the water" (Gen 7:18-20, 24: 8:1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13).

The usage of *mabbûl* in Psalm 29:10 can hardly be used to explain the term in Genesis, because the Psalmist's reference is a later one. The claim that *mabbûl* is "an old designation for the heavenly ocean"⁷⁴ can hardly be upheld because not a single piece of evidence can be marshaled in support of this conclusion.

It appears that *mabbûl* is an ancient Hebrew term. It has been suggested that it may be derived from the Hebrew root *ybl*, "to flow, to stream,"⁷⁵ which is also used in Ugaritic.⁷⁶ If the derivation from *ybl* is correct, then *mabbûl* is a technical term for waters flowing or streaming forth and as such designates the flood (deluge) being caused by waters.

In short, a careful investigation of the arguments for the suggestion that *mabbûl* in certain passages means "heavenly ocean" falls far short from being coercive. To the contrary, it appears that *mabbûl* is in the Old Testament a term consistently employed for the flood (deluge) which was caused by torrential rains and the bursting forth of subterranean waters.

III. THE RECEDING OF THE WATERS OF THE DELUGE

The biblical flood narrative describes twice (Gen 8:3, 5) the receding of the waters after the waters from the sky and earth were stopped (8:2). A literal translation of the first part of Genesis 8:3 is as follows: "And the waters resumed *wayyāšubû* from the earth going and returning (*hālôk wāšôb*)." The wording in the original of this clause is not identical with the one in 8:5: "And the waters remained,⁷⁷ going and diminishing, until... (*wēḥāsôr*)." The idea expressed in Genesis 8:5 by the infinitive absolute *hālôk* is "to go on, to continue," namely a "long continuance"⁷⁸ in the process of gradually diminishing,⁷⁹ becoming less and less day by day.⁸⁰

The idea of 8:3 is different. The verb "to return" (*šûb*) is emphasized in this text,⁸¹ by being employed twice (*wayyāšubû* and *wāšôb*), a fact to which commentators pay usually no attention.⁸² But on account of this emphasis it may be gathered that the waters "returned" to the respective places from which they came, i.e., the upper sphere and the lower or subterranean sphere. It may be well to remember that the waters of the flood (*mabbûl*) came from the heavens and the great deep (*tēhôm*).⁸³ The usage of "returned" (*wayyāšubû*) in 8:3a appears to refer to the "return" of the waters to the sources from which they derived.

The phrase "going and returning" (*hālôk wāšôb*) in Genesis 8:3b speaks seemingly of the protracted process⁸⁴ of the subsiding of the flood waters. The sources of the waters had stopped (8:2) and God had caused a "wind" (*rûaḥ*)⁸⁵ to blow across the earth causing the waters to subside (8:1; *wayyāšokkû*). The process of the subsiding and going down of the water is next described as "going and returning" (8:3b), i.e., the waters recede gradually over some period of time⁸⁶ with a continuous movement of "going and returning," rushing back and forth in an action that reminds of tidal activity. Contextually the only cause mentioned which contributed to the continuous "going and returning" activity of the receding waters is the "wind" (8.1). The passage (8:1-5) does not state whether other forces were also at work.

ENDNOTES

1. Tuch F. 1871. *Commentar über die Genesis* (2nd ed.), *ad loc.*; Strack HL. 1905. *Die Genesis übersetzt und ausgelegt* (2nd ed.), *ad loc.*; Driver SR. 1909. *The book of Genesis* (7th ed.), *ad loc.*; Keil CF, Delitzsch F. 1878. *Commentary on the Old Testament: the Pentateuch* (3rd ed.), p141: "... the whole human race which had resisted the influence of the Spirit of God had become flesh"; Leupold HC. 1956. *Exposition of Genesis* (3rd ed.), I, 267: "Therefore 'all flesh' refers to the totality of mankind"; and others.
2. Delitzsch F. 1887. *Neuer Commentar über die Genesis*, p 169; Gunkel H. 1901. *Genesis* (Leipzig), p 129; Skinner J. 1930. *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis* (2nd ed., London), p 159f; Rabast K. 1951. *Die Genesis* (Berlin), p 137; Zimmerli W. 1967, 1. *Mose 1-11. Die Urgeschichte* (3rd ed., Zürich), p 305; Cassuto U. 1964. *Genesis* (Jerusalem), II, *ad loc.*
3. Discussions of the Hebrew term are provided by: Baumgärtel F. 1971. *Flesh in the Old Testament*. In: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VII, 105-110 (Grand Rapids, MI), hereinafter cited as TDNT; Gerleman G. 1971. *bāsār* Fleisch. In: Jenni E, Westermann C, editors. *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, I, 376-379 (Munich), hereinafter cited as THAT; (c) Bratsiotis NP. 1972. In: Botterwek GJ, Ringgren H, editors. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, I, 850-867 (Stuttgart), hereinafter cited as TWAT; (d) Lys D. 1967. *La Chair dans l' Ancien Testament "Bāsār"* (Paris).
4. A detailed account is provided by Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 851ff.
5. Genesis 6:12, 13, 17, 19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17; 9:11, 15a, 15b, 16, 17; Leviticus 4:11; 13:13, 43a, 43b; 17:14 (three times); Numbers 11:18; 16:22; 18:15; 27:16; Deuteronomy 5:23 (26); Job 12:10; 34:15; Proverbs 4:22; Psalm 65:3; 136:25; 145:21; Isaiah 40:5, 6; 49:26; 66:16, 23, 24; Jeremiah 12:12; 25:31; 32:27; 45:5; Ezekiel 21:4, 9, 10; Zechariah 2:17; Joel 3:1.
It is curious that the specialized articles on the Hebrew term usually say that there are about 40 usages of the formula "all flesh" (Gerleman, THAT, I, 378; Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 852) whereas there are actually 46 instances in which it appears.
6. Genesis 6:12, 13, 17, 19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17; 9:11, 15a, 15b, 16, 17.
7. The New American Bible renders the Hebrew *kol-bāsār* with "all mortals" (Gen 6:12, 13), "all creatures" (Gen 6:17, 7:15, 21), "all bodily creatures" (8:17; 9:11), "all living beings" (9:15a), "all other living creatures" (6:19), "all mortal beings" (9:15b), "all mortal creatures" (9:16, 17), and "all species" (7:16). The New English Bible translates "all men" (6:12), "all mankind" (6:13), "every human being" (6:17), "living creatures" (6:19), "all creatures" (7:15), "all living things" (7:16), "every living creature" (7:21; 8:17; 9:11; 9:15b), "every kind" (9:15a, 16), and "all that lives" (9:17). In these two recent versions there is no particular pattern which can be detected that would explain why the identical Hebrew expression is rendered with such a variety.
8. McKane W. 1970. *Proverbs: a new approach* (Philadelphia), p 310; Hulst AR. 1958. *KOL BASAR in der priesterlichen Fluterzählung*. In: *Oudtestamentische Studien* 12, p. 52, hereinafter cited as OTS.
9. Numbers 18:15; 16:22; 27:16; Psalm 136:25; Isaiah 66:16; Jeremiah 32:27; Job 34:15; Daniel 4:9 (Aramaic). Cf. Gerlemann, THAT, I, 378; Baumgärtel, TDNT, VII, 106; Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 852.
10. Hulst, OTS 12, p 42; (b) *Pentateuch*, III, 109.
11. Baumgärtel, TDNT, VII, 106; Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 852; Lys, p 113.

12. Lys suggests that the phrase “all the flesh of man” is equivalent to the parallel expression “every living thing” (p 121).
13. Both the New English Bible and the New American Standard Bible translate the Hebrew phrase as “all men.” According to its context this is certainly justified. Cf. Dahood M. 1968. Psalms II (Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY), II, 110; Weiser A. 1962. The Psalms (Philadelphia), p 463.
14. Wolff HW. 1963. Dodekapropheten: Joel (Neukirchen-Vluyn), p 80; Rudolph W. 1972. Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona (Gütersloh), p 71; Lys, p 91f.
15. Cf. Keil. 1956. Commentary on the Old Testament: Minor Prophets (Grand Rapids, MI), p 211.
16. Here we agree with those interpreters that recognize in the phrase “all flesh” a broader concept than literal Israel. Cf. Hulst, OTS 12, p 47ff; Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 852; Keil, p 210-218; Hengstenberg EW. 1970. Christology of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI), p 521-534.
17. See: Lys, p 90; Baldwin J. 1972. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachai (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary; Downers Grove, IL), p 112.
18. Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 852ff.
19. Köhler L. 1957. Old Testament theology (Philadelphia), p 136.
20. It should be noted that in the Hebrew part of the apocryphal book Sirach 40:8 the expression “all flesh” appears with reference to “all living creatures,” man and animals included, whereas in Sirach 1:10; 14:17 this very phrase is used with reference to “all mankind.”
21. Cassuto, Genesis, II, 139; Williams RJ. 1967. Hebrew syntax: an outline (Toronto), p 48.
22. Speiser EA. 1964, Genesis (Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY), p 59.
23. Against the forced exposition of: Scharbert J. 1967. Fleisch, Geist und Seele im Pentateuch (2nd ed., Stuttgart), p 53f.
24. Williams, Hebrew syntax, p48 #250; Gesenius W, Kautzsch E, Cowley AE. 1910. Hebrew grammar (Oxford), p 379 #1191.
25. It should be pointed out also that the usage of the Hebrew phrase “all flesh” as referring to animals appears also in Sirach 13:16; 17:4.
26. In Ezekiel 10:12 it seems to refer also to the body of the cherubim.
27. Job 10:12; Psalm 65:3 (2); 145:21; Isaiah 40:5, 6; 29:26; 66:23, 24; Ezekiel 20:4, 10; 21:5; Joel 2:28 (3:1); Zechariah 2:17. Cf. Sirach 1:10; 14:17.
28. Genesis 6:17; 9:11, 15a, 15b, 16, 17.
29. The interpretations proposed for this word are legion. For an overview of the discussion the reader may turn to: Skinner, Genesis, p 143f; Cassuto, Genesis, I, 295f; Westermann C. 1972. Genesis (Neukirchen-Vluyn), p 506f.
30. The present writer follows here the Masoretic Text which has the reading of *bēš-aggam*, i.e., “inasmuch as he also” which consists of the Hebrew preposition *bē* and the relative particle *še* and *gam*. The ancient versions have understood this word in this way (LXX, Syriac, Vulgate, Targum Onkelos) and a number of recent commentators: Cassuto, Genesis, I, 295f; Kidner D. 1967. Genesis (Chicago), p 84; Westermann, Genesis, p 57f.
31. Gunkel, Genesis, p 52f; Westermann, Genesis, p 508.
32. Genesis 9:12, 15, 16.
33. Genesis 9:11, 15a, 15b, 16, 17.

34. For example, Keil, *Pentateuch*, I, 142; Scharbert, *Fleisch, Geist und Seele im Pentateuch*, p 52; Bratsiotis, *TWAT*, I, 861.
35. Westermann, *Genesis*, p 560.
36. On a discussion of this term, see J. Stoebe, "hamas Gewalttat," *THAT*, I, 583-587.
37. Holladay WL, editor. 1971. *A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI), p 109.
38. Cassuto, *Genesis*, II, 53; Hulst, *OTS* 12, p 55-60.
39. Köhler L, Baumgartner W. 1958. *Lexicon in Veteri Testamenti Libros* (Leiden), p 312, hereinafter cited as *KBL*.
40. *Ibid.*, p 311.
41. We cannot follow the suggestion of many commentators who strike out arbitrarily the Hebrew words "and beasts" (recently again Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, p 358f), because there is no warrant for this whatever in any Hebrew manuscript. We must, therefore, accept the Hebrew text as it stands without forcing it into the modern patterns of thought (with Keil, *Minor Prophets*, I, 409).
42. See Holladay, p 162; *KBL*, p 449f.
43. Westermann, *Genesis*, p 560.
44. *Genesis* 49:5f; *Judges* 9:24; *Isaiah* 59:6; *Jeremiah* 51:35; *Ezekiel* 7:23; *Joel* 4:19.
45. We agree with the emphasis of C.F. Keil "that the precise meaning of the word must always be determined from the context" (*Pentateuch*, I, 142).
46. Among those holding this view, see above, notes 2 and 4.
47. See the standard critical introductions to the Old Testament, e.g., Eissfeldt O. 1965. *The Old Testament: an introduction* (NY), p 204-208; Fohrer G. 1968. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville), p 178-185; Robert A, Feuillet A. 1970. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Image Books; Garden City, NY), I, 187ff; Kaiser O. 1969, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Gütersloh), p 95. Not all critical scholars, however, are agreed on a post-exilic date. F.M. Cross believes that an "Exilic date for the major Priestly work seems almost certain now." (Cross FM. 1968. *The Priestly tabernacle*. In: Sandmel S, editor. *Old Testament issues* (NY), p 53. Y. Kaufmann (1960. *The religion of Israel* [Chicago]), p 153ff, puts P as the earliest document into the time of the establishment of the Hebrew monarchy. For a comprehensive assessment of these critical views, see: Harrison RK. 1969. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI), p 19ff; Archer CL. 1964. *A survey of Old Testament introduction* (Chicago), p 73-110; Cassuto U. 1961. *Documentary hypothesis* (Jerusalem); Segal NH. 1967. *The Pentateuch: its composition and its authorship and other biblical studies* (Jerusalem).
48. For pertinent critiques of the source division of the *Genesis* flood narrative, see: Kidner D. 1967. *Genesis* (Chicago), p 97-100; Jacob B. 1930. *Die biblische Sintfluterzählung. Ihre literarische Einheit* (Berlin); Cassuto, *Documentary hypothesis*, p 36, 47f; Cassuto, *Genesis*, II, 33-43.
49. Cassuto, *Genesis*, II, 34.
50. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 560, who follows in this argument Hulst, *OTS* 12, pp. 28-68.
51. Keil, *Pentateuch*, I, 142.
52. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, I, 267.

53. Nötscher F. 1963. Gotteswege und Menschenwege in der Bible und in Qumran (Münster), p 17-69; Sauer G, “daeraek Weg,” THAT, I, 456-460.
54. Holladay, A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament, p 74.
55. McKane, Proverbs, p 658.
56. Scott RBY. 1965. Proverbs-Ecclesiastes (Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY), p 181.
57. Sauer, THAT, I, 458.
58. Cassuto, Genesis, II, 54.
59. Bratsiotis, TWAT, I, 861.
60. Skinner, Genesis, p 159.
61. Rabast, Genesis, p 132.
62. Ibid., p 81f.
63. Keil, Pentateuch, I, 142; Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, I, 267.
64. Genesis 6:17; 7:6, 7, 10, 17; 9:11, 28; 10:1, 32; 11:11.
65. Genesis 9:11, 15.
66. This is the assessment of Begrich’s study (Begrich J. 1928. *Mabbûl, Eine Exegetisch-Lexikalische Studie*. In: *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 6:13f, hereinafter cited as ZS; by Albright WF. 1939. The Babylonian matter in pre-Deuteronomic primeval history, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58:98; and followed by Marks JH. 1962. Flood (Genesis), in: *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville), II, 279f.
67. This suggestion has come from the study of Begrich, ZS 6:135ff and has been accepted by many. For example, Albright, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58:98; Zimmerli, I. Mose 1-11, p. 311; von Rad G. 1961. *Genesis, a commentary* (Philadelphia), p 124; Marks, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, II, 280; Kidner, *Genesis*, p 89. This view is also reflected in the two standard Hebrew lexicons: KBL, p 491; Holladay, p 181.
68. A summary of these arguments is found in Marks, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, II, 280, but an extensive elaboration is provided by Begrich, ZS 6:139ff.
69. Williams, *Hebrew syntax*, p 12f.
70. Ibid., p 16 #68.
71. This translation is much like the one in the New Jewish Version and by Speiser, *Genesis*, p 47, both of which translate: “For My part, I am about to bring the Flood — waters upon the earth — to destroy all flesh.” This translation is essentially also supported by the New American Bible which abbreviates as follows: “I, on my part, am about to bring the flood [waters] on the earth.” This recent Catholic version puts the word “waters” in square brackets indicating that it is a gloss. Many exegetes regard the word “waters” (*mayim*) as a later addition and it is marked as such in the standard critical Hebrew Bibles (Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*; *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*). This view, however, has nothing to support it, because the text is well preserved so that there is no textual support for this supposition.
72. Skinner, *Genesis*, p 162.
73. This meaning of *mabbûl*, referring to the “flood, deluge,” is supported by a great number of commentaries and exegetes: Orinsky HM. 1969. Notes on the new translation of the Torah (Philadelphia), p 75; Rabast, *Genesis*, p141, Cassuto, *Genesis*, II, 66f; Keil, *Pentateuch*, I, 143; Skinner, *Genesis*, p 162; Leupold, *Genesis*, I, 273; Speiser, *Genesis*, p 47-49; and many others.

74. Begrich, ZS 6:141.
75. Cassuto, Genesis, II, 66f; Marks, Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, II, 280.
76. The root "ybl" appears in an Ugaritic inscription used in the sense of "to cause to come, to bring" waters in the form of rain and from the deeps or subterranean sources (Gordon CH. 1965. Ugaritic textbook [Rome], I Aqht 42-43), cf. Cassuto, 1939, Orientalia 8:239.
77. The Hebrew verb here is *hayû* and cannot have the two following infinitive absolutes joined with it and treated as a mere auxiliary as the traditional translations render it: "and the waters were decreasing." Cf. König FE. 1897. Historisch-comparative Syntax der hebräischen Sprache, #402b. It seems, therefore, that *hayû* must have a meaning like "remain" or "exist."
78. Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley, Hebrew grammar, p 344 #113u; cf. Williams, Hebrew syntax, p 41 #206: "To express continuous action or repetition it [inf. absolute] follows the finite verb." Brockelmann C. 1956. Hebraische Syntax (Neukirchen-Vluyn), #93a.
79. Holladay, A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament, p 79f; "*hālôk* expresses the continuation and progress of the action ... 'further and further' Gn 12:9."
80. Cf. Cassuto, Genesis, II, 106.
81. So rightly Cassuto, Genesis, II, 106.
82. Among notable exceptions are Leupold, Genesis, I, 310; Cassuto, Genesis, II, 102.
83. Genesis 7:11.
84. How Leupold, Genesis, I, 310, arrives at the suggestion that this refers to a "pronounced fall" is an unexplained mystery.
85. This term is employed over 100 times in the Old Testament for "wind," KBL, p 877f. For a description of the violent force of this wind, see White EG. 1958. The story of patriarchs and prophets (Mountain View, CA), p 107, 108.
86. Cassuto (Genesis, II, 102) suggests that the waters of the flood rose only during the first forty days. This seems hardly supported by the total picture of the flood account (cf. 7:18, 20, 21ff, 24; 8:1).