

EDITORIAL

FLOOD STORIES — CAN THEY BE IGNORED?

One of the objections voiced against geologists who believe a flood to be a major geologic event of the past (flood geologists) is that they often begin with the proposition that the biblical account of the flood is true and then attempt to fit the scientific data into that given model. It is sometimes further implied that religious commitment and bias is the basis for selection of data to fit the concept; hence, one is not dealing with a fair and open system of inquiry. While there is bias and commitment in all broad areas of inquiry, in this case one needs not turn to the Bible or religion to find support for flood geology. The idea of a dreadful flood, sometimes called the deluge, is remarkably entrenched in non-biblical sources. Such sources serve as an independent basis for evaluating such an event.

The most important extrabiblical flood account is found in the Gilgamesh Epic, the outstanding literary work from ancient Babylon. It was discovered during archaeological excavation at Nineveh in the famous library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, which dates from about the 7th century B.C. The epic is written on 12 tablets in cuneiform (wedge shaped) script of the semitic Akkadian language. The hero of the story, Gilgamesh, is in search of eternal life and strongly protests against death. He seeks out Utnapishtim who has been granted eternal life because he saved animal and human life at the time of the great flood.¹ The flood account, which is reported on tablet No. 11, is remarkably similar to the biblical account given in Genesis. There is general agreement among scholars that the two accounts are related because of close similarities. For instance, in both accounts: a) the flood is brought on because of evil on earth; b) the flood is divinely planned; c) the hero is instructed to build an ark for the preservation of mankind and animals; d) a select group of mankind, animals, and provisions are taken into the ark; e) the event is universal;² f) after the flood subsides the hero releases a raven and a dove (the Babylonian account also has a swallow; however, in a different sequence) to test the dryness of the land; g) at the flood's end a sacrifice offered to deity is well accepted.

The ancient Greeks also had the concept of a deluge.³ Their flood hero, Deucalion, was advised by his father to construct an ark because the god Zeus wished to destroy mankind. Deucalion and his wife entered the ark after stocking it with provisions. Zeus caused such a great rain that in nine days it washed down the greater part of Greece. Most men perished, except a few who fled to high mountains. Deucalion also survived in his ark. There were other Greek stories of a deluge. Some scholars distinguished three such events, although the one associated with Deucalion is the most famous.⁴

The Aztecs of Central America also had the concept of one or several deluges. These flood concepts antedate the 16th-century advent of missionaries, who brought the flood story from the Bible. The Aztec legend of beginnings⁵ includes an original earth which was destroyed by a great flood caused by the rain god Tlaloc. One account indicates that after the creation of the world there was a period of 1716 years before its destruction by flood and lightning.⁶ Severe earthquakes followed. Tlazolteotl is “the woman who sinned before the deluge”, while the flood heroes Nata and Nena escaped the ravages by building themselves a ship. Others escaped by taking refuge in caverns or mountaintops. The threat of subsequent deluges was taken very seriously, and the Aztecs are reported to have sacrificed large numbers of children to the rain god Tlaloc as appeasement.

In ancient history a major flood was not just considered as plausible but was factually incorporated into the thought systems. For instance, man’s early historical account was often divided into pre-flood and post-flood groupings. Aristotle wrote about the ravages of the deluge in the time of Deucalion. Plato also mentions the flood which took place in Deucalion’s time.⁷ Later in the second century A.D., in the town of Apamea⁸ in Asia Minor, coins were issued which had images of the ark, Noah and his wife, a dove, etc.⁹ While it seems likely that there had been Jewish biblical influence by this time, issuing a coin to commemorate the deluge indicates how important that event was considered.

The accounts given above represent a minute sample of the available flood stories. Instead of elaborating further on this theme, consideration will be given to the objections that have been raised about the authenticity of these accounts.

One of the most prevalent criticisms is that these ubiquitous flood accounts are derived locally, possibly from local floods,¹⁰ and are not from a worldwide event as described in the Bible. The point is difficult to substantiate. It is probable that some of these accounts have a local origin. Many of them vary in details, as the examples given above have shown. However, variations would be expected if the story originated in Asia Minor, as seems to be the case,¹¹ and was passed on orally from generation to generation. The oldest accounts and the ones most similar to the biblical one are found in Asia Minor. On the other hand, certain themes such as a favored family saved, a universal deluge, and birds sent out to test for dry land, are well distributed over the world.¹² These worldwide characteristic themes challenge the local-flood concept.

In 1929 the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley electrified the archaeological world when he announced that he had discovered a deposit of the biblical deluge in his diggings at Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia. About 40 feet down, Woolley found between layers of human occupation a 10-foot layer of silt and sand that contained no archaeological artifacts. (Other workers found a similar layer at Kish and at several other ancient Mesopotamian

cities.) Woolley interpreted this layer to be caused by the flood of Noah, which he considered to be local rather than worldwide. His concept has not survived careful scrutiny. The deposit that Woolley found was too young to fit even with biblical dating for the flood. Besides, it could not even be found all over the town of Ur. The other deposits at Kish and elsewhere turned out to be younger than the one at Ur.¹³ These are very localized deposits which do not fit the cataclysm usually depicted in flood stories.

Another objection to the validity of flood stories is that they may have resulted from the influence of missionaries traveling over the world spreading their biblical teachings. While this is recognized to be the case in a few instances, it is an objection that is not taken very seriously, since most of these deluge accounts antedate the advent of Christian missionaries.

Some suggest that the biblical flood account is based on Babylonian and earlier myths, instead of an actual event.¹⁴ There is no question that the Babylonian and biblical accounts are related, since so many details are similar in both. Conversely, it has been suggested that the Babylonian accounts were based on the biblical one. One could assume this for later versions, such as the Gilgamesh Epic probably dating from the 7th century B.C. This proposition has not stood the test of more recent inquiry since Sumerian texts that precede the Babylonian texts and the earliest assumed time for the writing of the biblical text have been found. The biblical Genesis account was probably written about the 15th century B.C., while some Sumerian flood tablets most likely originated many centuries earlier.¹⁵ Sumerian writing is the oldest literature known, and it is of interest that here also we find a flood account.

In support of the view that the biblical account is based on Babylonian myths, attempts have been made to show Babylonian influences on the biblical text. Such efforts are rather poor arguments, since similarities of terminology purporting relationship between the two are not unique.¹⁶ One must also recognize that in comparison to the Sumerian and Babylonian stories, there are unique aspects to the biblical account. The Bible gives the most detailed account available and is fiercely monotheistic (one God), while the other accounts are strongly polytheistic (many gods).

More significant to the question of the origin of flood stories is the proposal by Alexander Heidel of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago¹⁷ that these flood legends all have a common origin. While Heidel feels this point is not proven, there is one factor that belies all other explanations; namely: how can one explain the worldwide dominance of stories about this kind of catastrophe if it did not have a common basis? A common origin¹⁸ lends confirmation to the biblical model, according to which the flood story would be spread from Asia Minor by the few survivors of the flood as they repopulated the earth. The Genesis account would also be based on the event itself.

Some 270 flood stores have been recorded around the world.¹⁹ The literature discussing them is abundant.²⁰ Their geographical distribution is not uniform, but is generally worldwide. They are most common in Asia, islands south of Asia, and the New World, being found from Tierra del Fuego to north of the Arctic Circle. They are more rare in Africa and Europe. Specific localities where they are especially noted include Egypt, Greece, Persia, Syria, Italy, Wales, Scandinavia, Russia, India, China, Mexico, Indonesia, New Guinea, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia and Australia.

Many scholars testify to the fact that accounts of a deluge are essentially coexistent with nearly all of the human family.²¹ What is more significant is their unusual abundance. Even those who do not believe in a worldwide deluge acknowledge this. Albright speaks of the “extraordinary diffusion of deluge stories over the world.”²² Gaster states: “Legends of a primeval deluge...are a feature of almost all primitive mythologies”;²³ Woods states that these accounts “are remarkably frequent in the folklore of the ancient literature of peoples scattered over the greater part of the world”;²⁴ and Huggett, in his book on flood concepts, reflects the same when he comments: “It is exceedingly difficult to say just why so many ancient cultures should believe in cataclysms.”²⁵

Stith Thompson has compiled and organized motifs in folk literature into a monumental five-volume treatise.²⁶ This listing includes some 33,000 specific motifs, all of which have referenced accounts. The literature dealing with past world calamities shows a definite preponderance of comment concerning the deluge, both in terms of motifs and references. The number of references for specific causes of past world calamities in Thompson’s Index is as follows: deluge 122, fire 19, continuous winter 6, large stones 2, misc. 4. It is noteworthy that common causes of calamities such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, pestilence, and drought are not listed. This also testifies to the remarkable commonness of flood traditions which have been present from the time of man’s earliest writing to the present. One could hardly expect that accounts of major catastrophes from all over the world would be so selective of one theme of catastrophe if it had not been based on an actual worldwide event. This dominance strains the proposal that these accounts arose locally.

Whether one is a flood geologist, a no-flood geologist, or otherwise, the flood cannot be readily discarded as an incidental historical event. Furthermore, questions concerning this event are the bases of much of the controversy between creation and evolution. Creationists use this event to explain much of the data for which mainstream geologists propose geologic time and evolutionary trends in fossils. It turns out that this event has rather impressive non-biblical authentication. Any system of explanation for origins can ill afford to deny the deluge.

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ENDNOTES

1. For an English rendition, see: Heidel A. 1949. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament parallels*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p 80-93.
2. *Ibid.*, p 249.
3. Frazer JB. 1918. *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*. Vol 1 (of 3). London: Macmillan, p 66-67.
4. *Ibid.*, p 70.
5. Sykes E. 1965. *Everyman's dictionary of non-classical mythology*. Rev. ed. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, p 24.
6. Vaillant GC. 1962. *Aztecs of Mexico: origin, rise and fall of the Aztec nation*. Rev. ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, p 56.
7. Frazer p 67 (Note 3).
8. Teeple HM. 1978. *The Noah's are nonsense*. Evanston, IL: Religion and Ethics Institute, p 39.
9. Nelson BC. 1968. *The deluge story in stone*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, p 176.
10. Woods FH. 1959. Deluge. In: Hastings J, editor. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 4. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, p 545-557.
11. Teeple, p 40 (Note 8).
12. See Fig. 38, p 169 in Nelson (Note 9).
13. (a) Albright WF. 1936, 1955. Recent discoveries in Bible lands. Supplement. In: *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*. NY: Funk & Wagnalls, p 30; (b) Filby FA. 1970. *The flood reconsidered*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p 28-30.
14. For a comparison of these with the biblical text, see: Shea WH. 1984. A comparison of narrative elements in ancient Mesopotamian creation-flood stories with Genesis 1-9. *Origins* 11:9-29.
15. Heidel, p 236 (Note 1).
16. *Ibid.*, p 264-267.
17. *Ibid.*, p 267.
18. Teeple, p 10-40 (Note 8).
19. Vos HF. 1982. Flood (Genesis). In: Bromiley GW, editor. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p 319-321.
20. See for instance the references already cited above: Frazer; Nelson; and Woods. See also: (a) Gaster TH. 1969. *Myth, legend and custom in the Old Testament*. NY: Harper & Row; (b) Sykes E. 1965. *Everyman's dictionary of non-classical mythology*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons; (c) Thompson S. 1989. *Motif-index of folk-literature*, Vol. 1. Reprint of the 1955 edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; (d) Andress R. 1891. *Die Flutsagen*. Braunschweig, Germany: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn; (e) Reim JKR. 1925. *Die Sintflut in Sage und Wissenschaft*. Hamburg, Germany: Agentur des Rauhen Hauses.
21. See the references already cited above: Albright, p 30; Woods, p 545; Vos, p 321; Nelson, p 165; Gaster, p xxix; Frazer, Vol. 1, p 105; Filby, p 41. See also: (a) Rehnwinkel AM. 1951. *The flood in the light of the Bible, geology, and archaeology*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, p 136; (b) Rudhardt J. 1987. *The flood*. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5, p 356.
22. Albright, p 30. (Note 13a)
23. Gaster, p xxxix (Note 20a).
24. Woods, p 545 (Note 10).
25. Huggett R. 1989. *Cataclysms and earth history: the development of diluvialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p 17.
26. Thompson (Note 20).