

How Noah's Flood Covered the "Whole World"¹

"Moreover all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth." (Genesis 41:57)

If students of Noah's flood account limit themselves to such English words as "earth" or "world," as opposed to the Hebrew word *eretz* (which covers a far broader array of meanings), and also isolate the meaning of the phrase "the whole earth" (Genesis 6-8) from its usage everywhere else in Scripture, it will surely appear that this passage describes a *global* deluge. Yet for conservatives, the final authority on these matters is the *original Hebrew* text (as opposed to English). Martin Luther insisted on this very criterion.² In light of these two indicators, a substantially different view of the extent of the flood begins to emerge. On the one hand it is true that hundreds of cultures scattered across our globe *today* refer to a major flood in their distant past.³ The fact that these stories, apart from their core belief in a huge flood, also contradict each other in many *details*, doesn't nullify the likeliness of a main kernel of truth uniting all these accounts. They are a rational reason for believing there was a catastrophic flood that covered the whole "earth" (both *eretz* and *adamah*) of Noah's time.⁴ Yet viewed in the biblical context, the term, "whole earth" may mean something different from "entire globe" in a cosmological sense.

The challenge of interpreting Genesis correctly is neither merely a matter of possessing more scientific facts than Moses knew, nor arrogantly diminishing God's power, than it is recognizing the reality that we live in two widely-different cultures and circumstances, with equally differing (though valid) modes of verbal expression. I will here argue on the basis of Genesis 11:9 that the *global* aspect of the world-wide array of testimonies to a major flood today can be accounted for by the migration of people, from out of a localized area in Asia, out across their world in every direction following the flood.

Reassessing the Actual Text of Genesis 6-8

Genesis 6-8 specifies that God's ultimate goal was to destroy all of *humanity* in a manner that would only secondarily impinge on the non-human biological world along with it. Since it was plainly the extent of *human sin* and wickedness which moved God to destroy the entire *human race* (Gen. 6:5-8) excepting Noah and his family, and since humanity had yet to spread across the *entire* world (Gen. 11:1-9), it wasn't necessary to God's purpose that the flood should extend beyond the geographical limit of human habitation at that time, which would have entailed roughly the land we identify today as a portion of the Middle East. Although this biblical insight does not in itself prove that Noah intended to convey a flood limited in (geological) scope, these factors, taken together, yield a context for our reflection on the more than forty instances where the Bible specifies the extent of the flood with the words "all," "every", and "everything," as in "*all the earth*."⁵ What might these expressions mean in terms of both the frame of reference and the plausible intentions of Moses the author of Noah's flood?

¹ The English Standard Version of Genesis 8:9 says, "...for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth."

² Martin Luther argued that we must not neglect the biblical languages in Walter Brandt, ed. *Luther's Works* v.45. (Fortress, 1962), p.359f.

³ Mark Isaak has compiled a list at <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood-myths.html>

⁴ 2 Pet. 3:6 distinguishes *kosmos* (inhabited world – John 3:16) from the *gae* (from which we derive the word "geology)) that *then* existed."

⁵ Hugh Ross. *Navigating Genesis*. (Reasons to Believe, 2014), p.145.

Dr. Hugh Ross identifies six⁶ examples of “*whole world*” or equivalent events as identified in both Testaments of the Bible in English translations.⁷ First, Moses in Gen. 41:57 states that “*all of the earth*” (*eretz* — peoples subject to Egypt’s sovereignty or its influence—42:5-6) came to Egypt to buy bread. Second, 1 Kings 4:34 says, “Men came from *all* peoples to hear the wisdom from Solomon, and from *all* the kings of the *earth*” (*eretz* — that is, from surrounding lands, and as far south as Ethiopia). Third, in Luke 2:1 Caesar Augustus decreed that “*all the world* [*oikoumenay*] should be enrolled” in a census (meaning the households within the Roman Empire). Fourth, Acts 2:5 states that “*there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven*” (entailing the Roman and Parthian empires). Fifth, in Romans 1:8 the Apostle Paul celebrated that the “*faith*” of the church in Rome “*was proclaimed in all the world*” (*kosmos* — entailing much of the Roman Empire). And sixth, In Colossians 1:6 Paul celebrated that the Gospel was bearing fruit in the *whole world* (*kosmos* — meaning a people within a portion of the Roman Empire). Surely Israel and its people, centered as they were at the crossroads of three continents and along trade routes between powerful neighboring civilizations, were not ignorant of the existence of other people groups who nevertheless might play no role in affairs just described. Was Moses an exception to that awareness? Obviously not!

Please notice that Hugh Ross’s investigation into the meaning of the biblical phrase “*all the world*” by appealing to parallel expressions in Scripture, does not violate sound conservative principles of biblical interpretation. To the contrary, he is employing the same criterion that is consistently embraced by conservative scholarship as a whole, including advocates of young-earth creationism.⁸

When we today encounter terms such as, “*all the world*” in Scripture, it is easy to filter that vocabulary through the lens of our contemporary experiences of the same on the basis not only of inter-continental transportation but of satellite photography of both our own globe⁹ and out across the entire expanse of the cosmos.¹⁰ Yet the Hebrew word translated “*world*” in the biblical story of Noah’s flood (*eretz*-- Genesis 7:6) was elsewhere employed variously as either a **tiny plot of soil at one’s feet** (Gen. 18:2; 42:6), or as **extensive as the eye could survey** (Gen. 13:14,15), to a **relevant section of territory** (Gen. 15:18), to Israel as a **people group** (Jeremiah 22:29), all the way to the rarely addressed (though centrally believed) entire extensive habitation we today recognize as **planet Earth** (Gen. 1:1). The critical point is that the relevant geographical world of ancient peoples was far smaller than our own, though equally valuable and challenging to traverse. If God had wished to emphasize that our *entire* planet was covered with water, the word *tebel* would have better achieved this goal.¹¹ Yet that term was not employed in the Genesis account. Instead, an additional word translated “*earth*” (*ha’adamah*— “*Adam*”) was used in Noah’s flood account in Gen. 6:1, 7:4, 8. Its use here further implies that the extent of Noah’s flood **pertained solely to Adam’s race**. Both terms together, understood in Hebrew, also **remove** any grounds for any certitude that the term “*all the earth*” indicates the *entire globe*.

⁶ I add Gen. 11:1-9 as an additional example. This passage states that God first confused the single language of the *whole-earth* people who had come to congregate in Babel and then dispersed them over “the face of *all the earth*” (the grammar of both is identical in the Hebrew).

⁷ Op.cit. (5), p.146.

⁸ In my paper, “The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look” (p.6, n.26), I consider the YEC argument that parallel passages to the “*evening... morning*” creation day refrain elsewhere in Scripture designate 24-hour days to be **irrelevant** for the reason that **none** of the examples are substantially parallel. My paper, together with all my articles can be accessed at my website, <http://www.christianityontheoffense.com>.

⁹ Follow an internet search under the word, “earthrise.”

¹⁰ Follow an internet search under the name, “Hubble Deep Field.”

¹¹ Gleason Archer. A Survey of Old Testament Introduction. (Moody, 1964), p.94.

Any valid interpretation of the Flood story calls for us to step into modes of perspective and expression as employed in daily life in biblical times. We must remember that the *manners of speaking* we are considering aren't related relative degrees of scientific understanding. Even we employ similar modes of speaking. When for example Boston (an academically-inclined populace) gladly embraced the title "*World Series*" in recent years, no Red Sox fan expected the French to lose sleep over the audacity of that title ("*World Series*," Who's kidding whom?). John Frame¹² (a noted authority and proponent of biblical inerrancy) argues, that "God-breathed" Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16) consistently employs imprecise modes of expression that are universally employed in daily speech in every age including our own (e.g. "*How far is it from Galilee to Jerusalem? A three day walk.*"—"How far is it from here to Spokane? An hour by plane.>"). In Moses' day, images of the Earth as a globe would have been needlessly incoherent to his audience while the expression "*all of humanity*" would have driven the *point* of the flood home.

The Notion of a *Global* Flood Conflicts with the Geological Record

It is one thing, of course, to claim that limiting the geographical extent of the flood of Noah to the parameters of the inhabited world *can* be reconciled with the *text* of Genesis. But is there actual *scientific* evidence of a localized (as opposed to *total global*) flood? In terms of Scriptural evidence, Gen. 8:4 says the Ark came to rest on the mountains (*har-eem*—note pl.) of Ararat; not Mt. Ararat proper. Hydrological considerations force the question of sourcing the amount of water necessary to cover even the highest mountains¹³ since there is no hint of such a volume today. In terms of plate tectonics,¹⁴ the degree of turmoil from such an extreme upheaval of land as is alleged to have *formed* even our highest mountains would have ended the very existence of both the Ark and Noah's family.¹⁵ Some might ask whether God could not have miraculously secured their safety under such conditions. The answer is "*Yes of course...but...!*" Because God *can* do whatever He wishes (Gen. 1:1 perhaps!), He *could* have protected them even in such extreme conditions. Had He chosen so, then the flood would have entailed a series of providential acts that interwove numerous independent miracles. However, the challenge facing this assertion is that God's revealed Word is utterly silent as to such alleged interventions (notice Gen. 8:1b, to the contrary). On the one hand the Bible does speak of a catastrophe of such a scale as would destroy an entire race of sinful humans, excepting Noah and his family. But it gives **no indication** of an order of magnitude of *geological* turmoil over less than a year as could account for the current topography of our *entire* globe. The Bible **never** describes the flood as any more than a drastic elevation of water. The fact that the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers named in Gen. 2:14 reappeared after the flood indicates that this is so. Such *catastrophic* imagery is limited only to creation (Gen. 1:2, 9 and Ps. 104:8).

The *actual* biblical view (Noah's flood as *local* in geographical extent) by contrast avoids contradicting well-substantiated geological knowledge of the processes of fossilization and mountain building. Many years ago I found my first fossil-bearing sedimentary rocks while hiking in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, a range whose geological structure in certain places is sharply folded and tilted. These severely-bent angles (note Mt. Kidd, at the left)¹⁶ reveal shattered (implying hardened) joints and strata,

¹² John Frame. The Doctrine of the Word. (P&R Publishing, 2010), ch.26.

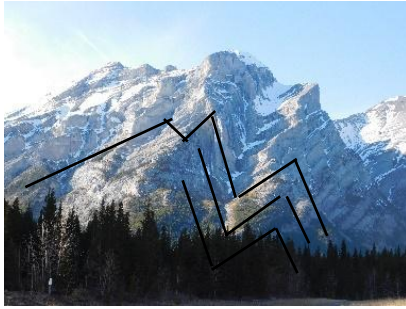
¹³ In order to cover the earth at the time in history when global flood proponents conjecture that Mount Everest was no more than a few hundred feet above sea level), **over 4 times as much water than is known to exist anywhere**, would have been required. Op.cit. (5), p.159.

¹⁴ <http://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/plate-tectonics/>

¹⁵ Op.cit. (5), p.165. The movement of land required to form these mountains in 150 days would yield about 42,000 magnitude 11 earthquakes.

¹⁶ My personal photo of Mount Kidd in *Kananaskis Country* of the Alberta, Canadian Rockies.

neither of which could have resulted from a continuously saturated mass of goo from a single year-long



flood. Yet indeed the Bible states that this aspect of global irregularity was not a result of God's judgment, but instead of His purposeful creation (Gen. 1:9-10; Psalm 104:5-9). Fossils such as I found in the Alberta Rockies have also been uncovered *sporadically* across the entire world at every elevation all the way to the summit of Mount Everest.¹⁷ Yet certain other major regions of the globe are void of fossils and/or the *sedimentary* rock which detectable fossils, by definition, require.¹⁸ Unless they were all formed *after* Noah's flood (NF), they count against NF being *global* for the reason that

any global deluge would have littered *every* region with fossils. In any case, it isn't sufficient to have water, sediment, and dead animals in order to create a fossil column. These natural features cannot have been the product of a singular flood for the reason that each successive level of sediment, together with its remains, must first be sufficiently solidified before the next layer is laid down. Yet it is these *successive* drying periods cannot be accounted for by a solitary global flood. Furthermore, fragile remains lying at the lower levels of any substantial column (e.g. the Grand Canyon) could never retain their structure under the crushing weight of thousands of vertical feet of water-saturated sediment bearing down on top of them, as from a *single* inundation.¹⁹ Neither is it enough for global flood advocates (GFA) to show merely that sediment *naturally* sorts itself out into visible layers (by the size and density of the debris).²⁰ *Actual* fossilization, I repeat, demands solidification prior to each subsequent deposition. Further, as Bruce Gordon writes, an alleged *global-wide* flood would also be expected to yield "*life forms of every sort jumbled together in the fossil record. [Yet, he continues,] this is not what we see.*"²¹

The challenges posed above further worsen under the reality that the Bible expressly forbids explaining away scientific evidence by appealing to Scripture as the highest authority of all. The reason is, this very same Scripture explicitly decries suppressing the testimony of nature (Rom. 18:20).²²

Dr. Ross identifies a potential location of the Flood of Noah that, on the other hand, is consistent with the Bible narrative. In light of current geological topography²³ he shows where the ark of Noah may well have floated (beyond the sight of land) for just a little over one year before Noah and family stepped back out onto dry land (Gen. 8:18). Ross suggests as a potential source of the water a reservoir

¹⁷ <http://mathisencorollary.blogspot.com/2012/03/crinoids-on-mount-everest.html>. A plausible means to account for such high altitude fossils is the process of plate tectonics in which the clash of continents causes land forms to buckle upwards. Note both Gen. 1:9-10 and Ps. 104:5-9.

¹⁸ Op.cit. (5), p.157.

¹⁹ <http://chem.tufts.edu/science/FrankSteiger/elders-flood-report.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.creationism.org/sthelens/fleshman/index.htm>

²¹ Bruce L. Gordon. "Scandal of the Evangelical Mind: A Biblical and Scientific Critique of Young-Earth Creationism." (http://www.godandscience.org/youngearth/critique_of_young_earth_creationism.html, October 13, 2014), p. 28 (boldface mine). ** See also, David R. Montgomery. *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood*. (W.W. Norton, 2012).

²² See my paper, "Does the Bible Permit Denigrating Science in Order to Maintain our Faith?" Op.cit. (8).

²³ <https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=c6A3sDiq&id=D3B941E42BE7445005494E7A791710588ADF4D0D&thid=OIP.c6A3sDiqwvBtGvc3DL0fWwHaGq&mediurl=https%3a%2f%2fcdn-assets.answersingenesis.org%2fimg%2farticles%2farj%2fv8%2fhugh-ross-flood-model%2ffigure-3.jpg&exph=866&expw=963&q=Hugh+Ross+Arabian+Penninsula+local+flood&simid=608037719071001809&selectedIndex=1&ajaxhist=0>

(black portion of image) held back behind an ice dam formed from a recent ice age whose collapse would have allowed an extensive (though limited) area it to become submerged in deep water.



Standing atop Beacon Rock (BR) a few years ago as it towered over the Columbia River, a plaque in front of me stated that an ice dam holding back *ancient* Lake Missoula some 18,000 years ago melted, collapsed, and then regained its original size repeatedly over the last ice age. With each collapse, 2,000 vertical feet of water that had backed up behind it broke through and roared across northern Idaho before veering south-westward across eastern Washington in its journey toward the Pacific Ocean. On its way, over 800 vertical feet of water gouged through what today is known as the Columbia River Gorge²⁴ separating Oregon and Washington. Much of its water however had already backed up behind *Wallula Gap* and formed 3,000 square mile *ancient Lewis Lake*. These sorts of events were common across geological history. The *plausibility* (not *actual* proof) of Ross's proposal is thereby established on the basis of similar occurrences over the eons of time. Significantly, one geologist who opposes biblical fundamentalism and conveys indifference to belief in God, independently draws the same conclusion.²⁵

Assessing our Assessment of the Available Evidence

Vital to our task of discerning a faithful interpretation of the biblical flood is our determination to gather *all* the relevant evidence, by both careful exegesis of the inerrant Word of God, and by analysis of all phenomena pertaining to the geological history of our planet. Although advocates of both the *global* and *local* flood positions appeal to evidence from these two sources, they don't do so in the same way. St. Paul states in Rom. 1:18-20 that, with respect to God's self-disclosure through "*the things that have been made,*" it is "*wickedness*" to suppress the evidence of the natural order. Nevertheless, *global* flood advocates (GFA) resort to a strategy of restricting which aspects of the evidence to choose from, thereby violating St. Paul's stricture. For example Ken Ham appeals to the "*goodness*" of God (notice that Paul concedes that God's "*ways*" are "*inscrutable*" in Rom. 11:33), to bolster his assertion that God would not have permitted animal death prior to Adam's fall.²⁶ Yet Ps. 104:21 (in celebration of *creation* as opposed to the fall), declares with approval, "*The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.*" Ham neglects and so consequently resists the evidence from both nature and Scripture that flesh-eaters thrived eons back into the past all the way to creation²⁷ (also Job 38:39-41).

The God of Genesis brought the entire universe into existence out of nothing through His word (Gen. 1:1, John 1:1-3, Heb. 1:1-3). Consequently God could without any limitation call all of the extra water necessary for a global flood into existence and then cause most of it to vanish. Yet what God *can* do and what He has freely *chosen* to do, are two different questions. This paper is an investigation into the means God appears to have employed to judge the "*world*" with a flood. In spite of the opinion of

²⁴ David Ault and Donald Hyndman. Roadside Geology of Washington. (Mountain Press, 1984), p. 171-176.

²⁵ Op.cit. (21), pp. 219-223.

²⁶ <https://answersingenesis.org/death-before-sin/did-death-of-any-kind-exist-before-the-fall/>

²⁷ See my challenge to this in my papers, "*Biblical Demand,*" p. 11, and ** and "*Alleged False Doctrine,*" at my website, (Op.cit. (8)).

certain Christians, it is not sinful to seek reconciliation²⁸ between the Bible and the knowable facts of geological history in order to determine the best interpretation of Noah's flood account.

Despite the best of intentions of GFA to defend the Bible, their propensity to insulate its claims from those facts of science which they deem problematic (e.g. fossilization) encourages suspicions by the public that Noah's flood cannot fit with the facts.²⁹ This tactic is entirely unnecessary. I have just listed prominent biblical examples of expressions such as "*all the world*" where in every case they were consciously employed in a non-exacting sense, and then established that the Hebrew text indicates the word translated, "earth," need not mean global. I also noted that God's expressed goal in the flood did not necessitate a *global* aspect. I conclude from these points that Genesis 6-8 speaks of a *local* flood (allowing for the reality of many previous floods of a range of magnitudes – Ps. 104:8). The *local* flood position alone reconciles the Bible with scientific knowledge concerning fossilization and mountain-building which, I have shown, decisively rebuts the very possibility of a single flood forming multiplied thousands of vertical feet of successively-layered strata, many of which are laden with fossils. Biblical revelation insofar as it is correctly interpreted, and scientific data insofar as it is substantiated, must, in the name of both truth and Paul's stricture in Romans, harmonize! A *local* flood fully fits that criteria.

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²⁸ The late LCMS scientist, Dr. John Klotz, stated correctly that our faith "*cannot go contrary to science and reason and observation...There must be a basic unity between [scientific] facts and truth as it is given to us in revelation.*" (Modern Science and the Christian Life. (Concordia, 1962), pp. 79, and 137f). ** Insofar as the two are perceived to be in conflict, then the conflict may lie in a faulty interpretation of Scripture.

²⁹ The attempt to sever scientific and/or historical facts from biblical revelation (e.g. employing the "ministerial/magisterial" use of reason which asserts that, where there are apparent contradictions, the Bible must trump science) undermines the possibility of substantiating the truth of the Gospel. The very notion of the unity of truth is at stake. See my paper, "*Truth is Never Less than One*," at my website, (Op.cit. (8).