

THE SUPERNATURALISM OF THE FLOOD

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Even as Christians have frequently been guilty of distorting the Biblical account of Creation by reading into it the concept of mere natural processes acting through vast periods of time, so also the Biblical record of the great Flood has suffered at the hands of uniformist interpreters. Geologists are certainly correct when they insist that a world-wide, mountain-covering Flood could not occur today, on the basis of the present balance of oceans and continents. There simply is no known natural mechanism or force in the crust of the earth sufficiently powerful to elevate oceans and submerge continents suddenly. But when these same geologists assert that the Book of Genesis is wrong when it tells us of this kind of a catastrophe at the dawn of human history, they are revealing their ignorance of the God of creation, miracle, and judgment. In the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29).

Advocates of the local-Flood concept have always found it convenient, of course, to question the validity of the appeal to miracle that must characterize the universal Flood view. Bernard Ramm, for example, is rather emphatic in insisting that "if one wishes to retain a universal flood, it must be understood that a series of stupendous miracles are required. Further, one cannot beg off with pious statements that God can do anything. . . . There is no question what Omnipotence can do, but the simplicity of the flood record prohibits the endless supplying of miracles to make a universal flood feasible."¹

In considering this objection, our attention is focused, in the first place, on the statement that "the simplicity of the flood record" prohibits the kind of supernaturalism that a universal Flood would call for. Dr. Ramm doesn't go on to tell us what this "simplicity" consists of, and this is unfortunate, for it is apparent that this serves as his interpretive key for the entire Flood narrative of Genesis. In the light of this, one cannot help but ask what other great supernatural events of Scripture would fall under Dr. Ramm's "simplicity" hermeneutic. Another leading evangelical scientist, Dr. J. Laurence Kulp, seems to have carried this idea to its logical conclusion when he writes: "Miracles should not be described as acts whereby God breaks His laws but rather as acts whereby He superimposes higher laws to effect His purposes. They are 'higher' only in the sense that man has not been permitted to discover them yet. Thus miracles occur from definite causes and the effect should be reproducible."² In

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other words, if we understand Dr. Kulp correctly, we too might change water to wine, multiply loaves and fishes, and raise dead people if we just knew a little more about the complex laws of the universe. The reader must judge for himself whether this is a Christian concept of uniformity in the universe.

In the second place, I am not aware of the necessity of appealing to "an endless supplying of miracles to make a universal Flood feasible." Some very important aspects of the Flood involved an outworking of natural laws and processes through the providence of God.

The most serious problem with Ramm's position, however, is its tacit denial of the Biblical testimony to the basically supernatural framework of the Genesis Flood. It is not a question of appealing desperately to the "sheer omnipotence of God" to prop up an unscriptural theory of catastrophism, but of honestly facing the clear statements of the Biblical text concerning the causes and effects of the Flood. A careful analysis of the relevant exegetical data reveals at least six areas in which supernaturalism is clearly demanded in the doctrine of the Flood: (1) the divinely revealed design of the Ark; (2) the gathering and care of the animals; (3) the uplift of oceanic waters from beneath; (4) the release of waters from above; (5) the formation of our present ocean basins; and (6) the formation of our present continents and mountain ranges. Each of these supernatural aspects of the Flood constitutes a radical break with the naturalistic presuppositions of modern scientism and for this reason deserves our careful consideration.

(1) THE DESIGN OF THE ARK

One hundred and twenty years before the Flood began, God revealed to one human being His purpose to destroy the earth by water, and instructed him to make preparation for this judgment by building an ark that would be the instrument for saving not only his family but also the seed of all airbreathing creatures in the world. This structure was significant, not only for its spatial dimensions and proportions, as we shall see, but also in its time dimension; for the hundred years of its construction provided a visible demonstration of God's unwillingness that any man should perish and an open invitation to salvation from impending doom. As Peter expressed it, "the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing" (I Pet. 3:20).

The spatial dimensions of the Ark constitute a remarkable testimony to the inner consistency and objective rationality of the Biblical flood account. Whereas the Babylonian flood account abounds in absurdities and speaks of the Ark as a perfect cube 120 cubits in each direction, and with nine decks, the God-revealed dimensions recorded in Genesis are both reasonable and appropriate in their proportions and magnitude in the light of the intended purpose of the Ark. With regard to its proportions, "a model was made by Peter Jansen of Holland, and Danish barges called Fleuten were modeled after the Ark. These models proved that the ark had a greater capacity than curved or shaped vessels. They were very seaworthy and almost impossible to capsize."³ As a flat-bottomed barge, not built to go anywhere, but simply to float, it had one third more carrying capacity than a ship with sloping sides of similar dimensions.⁴

Even more important, the dimensions of the Ark were sufficiently great to accomplish its intended purpose of saving alive the thousands of kinds of air-breathing creatures that could not otherwise survive a year-long Flood. Assuming the length of the cubit to have been at least 17.5 inches, the available floor space of this three-decked barge was over 95,000 square feet, and its total volume was 1,396,000 cubic feet. Such figures are difficult to picture, but to make it a little more realistic, imagine yourself waiting at a railroad crossing while five freight trains in a row, pulling 104 box cars each, slowly move by. That is how much space was available in the Ark, for its capacity was equivalent to 522 modern railroad stock cars. A barge of such gigantic size, with its thousands of built-in compartments (literally, "nests"-- Gen. 6:14) would have been sufficiently large to carry two of every species of air-breathing animal in the world today (and doubtless there are more "species" today than "kinds") on only half of its deck space.⁵ Quarters for Noah's family, compartments for five additional representatives of each of the ceremonially "clean" animals, and for two of each of the kinds that have become extinct since the Flood, plus rooms for storing "all food that is eaten" (6:21), would have filled the remaining space.

In the light of these statistics, two observations seem appropriate. First, the supernatural revelation granted to Noah concerning the Ark, a century before the Flood, serves to emphasize the fact that the Flood was not a mere natural-providential event in earth history, to be interpreted at a later time, by some form of poetic license, as a "miracle" of judgment. Instead, the hundred-year advance warning and detailed preparations by Noah put the Flood into the category of an eschatological, apocalyptic event, as far as the antediluvian world was concerned. In the second place, the size and proportions of the Ark constitute a strong apologetic for the divine inspiration of the Book of Genesis, for if Moses had simply invented the story, or had revised some current Flood legends, he could not have described the Ark in the way we find it in the Book of Genesis. He could not have known how large such a structure would have to be to fulfill such a purpose as we know today in the light of more extensive taxonomic studies.

(2) THE GATHERING AND CARE OF THE ANIMALS

A second major aspect of the supernaturalism of the Flood pertains to the air-breathing creatures that survived. In the very nature of the case, it would have been quite impossible for Noah and his family to have gathered thirty or forty thousand animals, of half that many kinds, into the Ark, even if they had spent the entire 100 years doing nothing else. A rather amusing illustration of this fact occurred recently in Italy a few miles south of Rome, when a film producer attempted to depict the story of the animals and the Ark. Much time and effort were expended in training a few zoo animals to walk two by two up a ramp into a model of the Ark. When the time came for the filming, however, "a water buffalo charged up the gangway, crashed through the ark and headed for Rome at full snort." After that, as the report continues, "the jungle's rougher embarkees were filmed behind glass."⁶

Some have gathered from a superficial reading of the passage that it was Noah's responsibility to collect the animals, because 6:19 says: "two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark." However, the following verse clarifies how this was to be done: "every sort shall come unto thee to keep them alive." The full supernaturalism of this event is underscored in the final account of what happened: "there went in two and two unto Noah into the ark"

(7:9). Robert Jamieson insists that "they must have been prompted by an overruling divine direction, as it is impossible, on any other principle, to account for their going in pairs."⁷ In other words, Noah waited in the ark for the animals to come in to him. Multitudes who had laughed at Noah's warnings must have been profoundly impressed by this spectacle of animals coming to the Ark, obviously led by the power of God.

Judging from the writings of some Christian scholars, however, the sight of so many animals coming to the Ark must have discouraged rather than thrilled Noah. For we have been assured by these men that it would have been an impossible task for Noah and his family to cope with tens of thousands of creatures in a floating barge for a year. Dismal word pictures are drawn of wild animals terrified by the movements of the Ark upon the waters, while the desperate human inmates of this floating menagerie tried in vain to calm them and to cope with the ever increasing sanitation problem.⁸ Bernard Ramm, for example, feels sure that "the task of carrying away the manure, and bringing food would completely overtax the few people of the ark."⁹

Such a picture, we are convinced, is completely contrary to the implications of Scripture. Our God is a God of order, not of confusion (I Cor. 14:33, 40). Having led Noah into this situation by supernatural means, would God's power no longer be available to sustain him? An analogous situation was faced by the human author of the Pentateuch many years later when he led his people out of bondage in Egypt by the supernatural help of God, only to face the barren wilderness and the humanly hopeless situation of finding food and water there for millions of people. Did the supernatural provisions of God fail Moses and his people then? Every believing student of Scripture knows the answer to that question.

If we look closely at Genesis 8:1, we will find an important key to the solution of this apparently unanswerable problem. We are told here that God "remembered" Noah and all of the animals in the Ark. When the Bible tells us that God "remembered" certain people, it means that He took care of them, providing for all their needs. But how did God do this in the case of Noah and the animals? Possibly by means of a supernaturally imposed hibernation or estivation experience, whereby the bodily functions of these animals were reduced to a minimum during the year of the Flood. As they were led into the thousands of compartments in the Ark and ate the food provided for them (6:21), God put them to sleep, as it were. This may be inferred from the fact that the animals entered the Ark two by two and a year later went out of the Ark two by two. Thus, there was no multiplication of species during the year of the Flood. God controlled these animals in a special way, so that Noah would not be faced with this gigantic problem. Notice that it was not until after Noah brought the creatures out of the Ark that God commanded them to "breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth" (8:17).

In the entire matter of the gathering of the animals to the Ark, and caring for them during the Flood, the Book of Genesis is consistently supernatural in its presentation. These important facts cannot be properly harmonized with a concept of the Flood that would reduce it to a natural and simple affair.

(3) THE UPLIFT OF OCEANIC WATERS

A third supernatural aspect of the Flood was the uplift of oceanic waters through the

breaking up of "the fountains of the great deep." The Bible excludes the possibility of a mere fortuitous combination of natural geologic causes here, for we are told that this involved "all the fountains of the great deep," and that they were all broken up "on the same day," namely, the seventeenth day of the second month of the six hundredth year of Noah's life. This was indeed a noteworthy day in world history, for in it God completely upset the delicate balances (isostasy) of the primeval continents and oceans (cf. Isa. 40:12) and initiated a catastrophe so gigantic that the "world (kosmos) that then was, being overflowed with water, perished" (II Pet. 3:6).

This uplift of ocean basins with a corresponding sinking of continents continued for six weeks until the Flood attained its maximum, mountain-covering depth (7:20); and this depth was maintained for another 110 days until the waters had destroyed every living thing on the continents. The uniqueness of this geologic discontinuity in earth history is emphasized in Genesis 8:21-22, "Neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." The terms of the rainbow in Genesis 9:8-17 and its repetition in Isaiah 54:9 ("I have sworn that the waters of Noah shall no more go over the earth") confirm the supernatural uniqueness of this global catastrophe.

(4) THE RELEASE OF WATERS FROM ABOVE

Most commentators tend to interpret "the waters which were above the firmament" of Genesis 1:7 simply in terms of clouds, because of a tacit assumption that present atmospheric conditions have continued, basically unchanged, since creation. However, this concept is in serious conflict with the plain statement of Genesis 7:11-12, that "the windows of heaven were opened, and the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights." This can refer to nothing less than the collapse of a stupendous vapor canopy which existed only during the antediluvian period, for it required six weeks for this water to pour down upon the earth. By contrast, if all the water vapor and clouds in the present atmosphere were precipitated to earth, the rain would last only a few hours and would produce an average depth of only two inches.¹⁰

If a vapor canopy of such magnitude existed from the second day of creation week to the time of the Flood, then climatic conditions must have been quite different from those we observe today. In the first place, it is probable that it never rained until the time of the Flood, and that throughout the entire antediluvian age "there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground" (Gen. 2:5-6).¹¹ Secondly, there were no great variations in climate in different parts of the earth because of the greenhouse effect of the vapor canopy.¹² Not until after these waters fell to earth are we told of great winds (8:1), which would imply significant temperature differences between equatorial and polar regions for the first time. In these polar regions, where tropical plants and animals once lived in abundance, huge masses of snow and ice suddenly began to accumulate.

Thus, "the world that then was," as the Apostle Peter describes the pre-Flood cosmos, differed profoundly from "the heavens that now are, and the earth" (II Pet. 3:7); and one of the greatest causes of this difference was the supernatural opening of the "windows of heaven" whereby the waters that were above the firmament, or atmospheric expanse, fell to earth in a never-to-be-repeated universal rain, to rejoin the earth's oceans for the first time since day

one of creation week. Thus, miraculous intervention, rather than a mere providential concurrence of natural forces such as are available for geologic activity in the earth today, provides once more the essential key for interpreting the dynamics of the Flood and the profound geologic and meteorologic changes that it introduced.

(5) THE FORMATION OF OUR PRESENT OCEAN BASINS

Even as the beginning of the Flood year was characterized by supernatural intervention, so also the end of the Flood was brought about by a stupendous miracle of God. Apart from this, the waters would have covered the earth forever, and life as we know it would have come to an end. Two passages of Scripture, in different Old Testament books, deal with this particular activity of God. The first, in Genesis 8:2-3, tells us that "the fountains of the great deep . . . were stopped. . . and the waters returned from off the earth continually." Since the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep involved the uplift of ocean floors, the stopping of these "fountains" must refer to a reversal of this action whereby new and much deeper ocean basins were formed to serve as vast reservoirs for the two oceans which were separated by the atmospheric expanse before the Flood. A natural result of this subsidence was that "the waters returned from off the earth continually," permitting continents to emerge from the oceans again, as they had done on the third day of creation.

A second passage that sheds important light upon the termination of the Flood is Psalm 104:6-9. Though it contains several figures of speech, the passage is clearly historical in its reference to the Flood. Note, for example, the statement of verse 6, "the waters stood above the mountains," and that of verse 9, "thou has set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth." The latter is obviously a reference to the rainbow covenant of Genesis 9, in which God assured mankind that there would never again be a universal Flood.

Now the key statement of this passage for our purposes is in the beginning of verse 8-- "The mountains rose, the valleys sank down" (ASV, RSV, Berkeley, Amplified, etc.). We have already seen in Genesis 8:2 that the ocean basins were lowered at the termination of the Flood, and with this concept the phrase "the valleys sank down" is in agreement. God's hand supernaturally depressed various parts of the earth's crust, and into those places which God "founded for them" the waters "fled" and "hasted away," never again to cover the earth.

(6) THE FORMATION OF OUR PRESENT MOUNTAIN RANGES

It is important to note that Psalm 104 adds one idea that is only implied in the book of Genesis. Not only were new and deeper ocean basins formed, but also "the mountains rose." Now this cannot refer simply to mountain peaks appearing to rise as the waters subsided, as if the passage were given from Noah's personal viewpoint as he peered from the windows of the Ark. Otherwise, the parallel phrase, "the valleys sank down" would have no meaning, and the obvious connection with Genesis 8:3 would be broken. The verse is actually saying that God supernaturally pushed up great mountain ranges in the continental areas to balance the new depths in the ocean basins. Thus, global topography, as we see it today, was not shaped by an accumulation of infinitesimal changes through vast periods of time, as the uniformist, Lyellian

approach to orogeny would insist, but rather by a sudden and stupendous work of God, whereby new continents emerged from the universal waters and sedimentary strata were lifted thousands of feet above sea level in the mountainous regions of the earth.

Such an interpretation of Psalm 104:8 incidentally solves one of the great problems connected with a universal Flood concept. It is frequently maintained, and rightfully so, that there simply is not enough water in our present oceans to cover all the mountains of the earth, even if ocean basins could somehow be pushed up to present sea levels, for there are many mountains over 20,000 feet high. But if these mountains rose to their present heights since the Flood, we may assume that none of the "high mountains" that existed before the Flood (Gen. 7:19) were more than six or seven thousand feet high.

CONCLUSION

If the basic supernaturalism of the Flood, as set forth in these various passages of Scripture, is to be taken seriously by the evangelical Christian, he must to that extent part company with the standard approach of historical geologists to the past history of our planet; for such an approach completely ignores the Genesis account of this world-wide catastrophe, and seeks to explain the earth's geologic and paleontologic features in terms of the uniformist principle. The Flood constitutes a sharp line of demarcation between our present world, with its basically uniform cycle of seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night (Gen. 8:22), and "the world that then was," with its low-lying, ice-free mountains, its rainless skies and universally warm and humid climate, and its shallow seas. The transformation that ended that world and started this world was as sudden and supernaturally cataclysmic as the change that shall end this present world and inaugurate the "new heavens and new earth" of Revelation 21:1. Our present world of natural processes, therefore, so far from being the proper scientific standard for judging and measuring the eternal past and future, is a unique cosmic interlude hemmed in by universal waters on the one side and universal fires on the other. As Christians who desire to honor God and His Word, let us not be found guilty of making void this infallible Word through the traditions of men as we seek to interpret the Biblical account of the Flood.

DOCUMENTATION

1. The Christian View of Science and Scripture, 1954, pp. 243, 247.
2. "The Christian Concept of Uniformity in the Universe," His Magazine, May, 1952, p. 16.
3. Ramm, op. cit., p. 230.
4. Alexander Heidel, The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels, pp. 233-235.
5. Cf. Whitcomb and Morris, The Genesis Flood, pp. 65-69.
6. Look Magazine, July 27, 1955.
7. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Eerdmans, 1948, I, 95.
8. Cf. Arthur Custance, The Extent of the Flood, 1958, pp. 19-20.
9. Ramm, op. cit., p. 246.
10. Cf. Lincoln Barnett, ed., The World We Live In, Time Inc., 1955, p. 81.
11. Cf. H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 1942, pp. 112-114.
12. Cf. The Genesis Flood, pp. 253-55.