



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

GENESIS 7:11; 8:1-3A

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11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.

1 But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; **2** the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, **3** and the waters gradually receded from the earth.

The Flood narrative of Genesis 7-9 has played a prominent role in science and religion debates for over three hundred years and gave rise in earlier centuries to geological theories such as old earth catastrophism. While literary studies have uncovered the chiasmic structure of the Flood story (see Gordon Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative" *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978):336-48) and with it the theological pivot point of the entire narrative (Gen. 8:1 – "And God remembered Noah . . ."), much of the popular attention remains on the questions regarding details (Is there THAT much water in the world to cover ALL the mountains to a depth of 15 cubits? Could you really fit 2/7 of every animal species in an ark that size?)

Looking at a smaller matter, we find at the beginning and the middle of the narrative indications of an ancient Near Eastern worldview. As the story is told, the flood was not merely the result of excessive rain, but actually the convergence of the waters above the earth with the waters below the earth. It is, as one translation puts it, as if the sluice gates at the deep and of the heavens were thrown open and water poured in from above and below. This is a consistent picture

from the Old Testament of a three-tiered universe -- a dome above the earth holding back the heavenly waters, a flat earth with water on its surface, and water under an earth which is held up by pillars.

That the story is told using the cosmology of its time should not be unduly unsettling, nor that the story is reinterpreted as new understandings of the universe come into favor. By way of example, consider John Calvin and his understanding of the structure of the universe. Although committed to the principle of sola Scriptura, Calvin recognized that the Bible would have been written in terms its original recipients would have understood.

Calvin inherited the medieval cosmology of his time, a way of viewing the world heavily influenced by Greek thought and one which was about to receive shocks from astronomers such as Copernicus and Galileo. But not just yet. Calvin still subscribed to the common conception of his day in which the four elements -- earth, air, fire, and water -- comprised the earthly sphere and possessed unique characteristics. The nature of air and fire was to rise, while the nature of earth and water is to sink. Earth, being heavier than water, should sink to the center of the cosmos and water should compose the next layer. Both earth and water are spherical, i.e., naturally form spherically around the cosmic center. Thus the heavier spherical element of earth should be encased entirely within the lighter spherical element of water.

Notice what this does to the flood story. For Calvin, the amazing thing is that the world isn't constantly under water and subject to flooding. In the cosmology of Calvin's day, it does not take an act of God to cause a universal flood, but rather an actively present and restraining hand of God to keep the waters back in everyday circumstances and make inundation by water something other than universal.

Obviously, Calvin was wrong. Or perhaps we should say that medieval cosmology was flawed and justifiably gave way to new conceptions of the universe. The answer is not to return to an ancient Near Eastern cosmology, but to reinterpret cautiously within new and better cosmologies and to pay close attention to the text and the theology of scripture.

The geological and planetary sciences bring their own unique contributions and are of more interest than the latest expedition to discover the ark on Mt. Ararat. Is the flood story a universalization of a catastrophic regional event that burned itself into the psyche of ancient cultures in the Mediterranean basin? Various theories regarding a Black Sea venue for a catastrophic flood event are still in process of being sorted out. It's intriguing. Or the question where the water on Planet Earth comes from? Was it always here as an emanation of vapors from the earth's crust in its early formation, or has it accumulated over eons through the steady bombardment of earth by small, icy comets? It's an intriguing scientific question that is in the midst of determination through testing.

Preaching Suggestions

When preaching on the story of the Flood, it is easy to get lost in the debates over particulars. As mentioned elsewhere, to tackle all the peripheral issues threatens to turn a sermon into a geology lecture. Other settings are better suited to addressing those questions, and those are best addressed open-endedly.

A brief explanation of ancient Near Eastern cosmology can be helpful to contextualize the story. If there are those who are tempted to think that a cosmology embedded in the Bible must be inspired

and definitive, one can note that cosmology has changed by the New Testament. The Bible itself isn't wed to a particular structure of the universe.

What is important is to keep the theology of the text front and center, and in that theology there are at least three non-negotiables from the flood narrative. First, human sin and violence threatens to undo a good creation (the flood is a de-creation event, a return of the waters mentioned in Genesis 1:2). Second, God remembers Noah, and never forgets his promises. Third, the end of the flood is a covenant with the whole earth regarding the stability and endurance of the natural order.