



# Flood theology: why does Noah's flood matter?

## Stephen Lloyd

The account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 comprises 56 verses, while the account of the flood in Genesis 6-9 comprises 81 verses – nearly 50% more. Many volumes have been written on the theology of creation but very little on the theology of the flood. Sermons on creation are far more common than those on the flood. Noah's flood appears to have little significance to modern Christians. Why?

- For many the flood is sidelined as a children's story. Despite the fact that it entails the most horrific, large-scale mass killing in history, it is seen as ideal Sunday School material, perhaps because it lends itself to exciting displays of animals.
- For adults, when the flood is addressed, it is taught as an isolated judgement story: sin leads to judgement and those who trust God are rescued. While this is undoubtedly correct it does not give the flood any special significance. There are many other stories in the Bible that teach the same lesson, so in this view, if Genesis 6-9 was removed from the Bible nothing substantial would be lost.

- Theistic evolutionists tend to pay very little attention to the flood. For example, Alexander (2008) gives it a single paragraph in his book. While Alexander and those who share a similar position believe Noah's flood was a historical event their concern is to minimise its historical and geological impact by insisting that it was a local, not a global catastrophe.
- Creationists do, to a degree, recognise the importance of the flood. Interestingly Whitcomb and Morris (1961) called their influential book "The Genesis Flood", not "The Genesis Creation." But generally speaking creationists' interest in the flood has focused on finding textual arguments for why the flood should be understood as a global, rather than local event – in other words countering their theistic evolutionist critics. This is the main concern of the biblical chapters in Whitcomb and Morris (1961) and in the more recent revision by Snelling (2009). There is very little treatment of the flood's significance theologically.

As creationists our lack of engagement with the theology of the flood is a mistake

because it reinforces the perception that the flood is of minimal theological significance. That affects how creationist arguments for the universality of the flood are heard. The textual arguments for a global flood are very strong, but they are usually ignored by theistic evolutionists because they are seen as unimportant. If it is assumed that there is little at stake theologically over whether the flood was a global event, there is little incentive to engage with the creationist arguments.

In this article I will show that the strongest arguments for a global flood do not rest on isolated proof-texts, but on central biblical themes. I will do this by looking at the place of the flood in the overall story-line of the Bible i.e. the story that takes us from creation to new creation via the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am not simply placing the flood within the story-line (much as you might show how a particular biblical character fits into the Bible's time-line) but showing why the flood is essential to the coherence of the

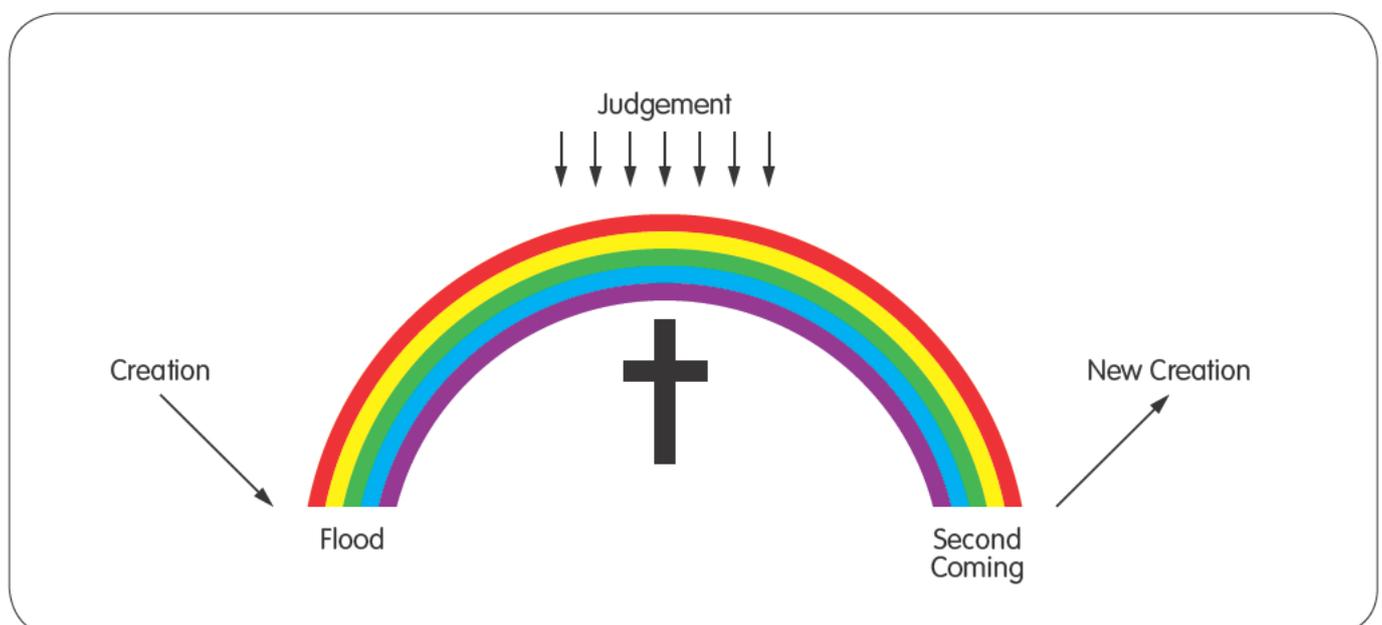


Fig 1. The flood in the storyline of the Bible. The rainbow is the symbol of the Noachide covenant that preserved the Earth from future destruction by a flood.

story-line of the Bible and thus to the gospel itself. In short, I am explaining why Noah's flood matters.

### **(1) All history: the flood in the story from creation to new creation**

The flood is theologically significant because without it we are missing part of the story-line through which we interpret all history.

2 Peter 3:3-10 sets out a time-line for the Bible's story. There are three acts of creation occurring by word of God: the initial creation in which land and water are separated, the flood which reverses that separation (an act of "de-creation") where the waters again cover the earth before recreating what is our current world. Thirdly, our current world will one day be purified by fire and re-created. The flood is therefore one of the markers of key epochs in history: the world before flood, the present world and the new creation. The world we live in now is different to the original creation because of the flood.

The idea that the flood was starting a new epoch in history was something assumed in Jewish thinking. Peter himself assumes it in 2 Peter 2, in which Peter uses Noah as an example, a model, for the Christians he was writing to. Bauckham (1983) summarises the message of 2 Peter 2:5-9 in this way:

*"Noah, preserved from the old world to be the beginning of the new world after the Flood, is a type of faithful Christians who will be preserved from the present world to inherit the new world after the judgement."*

This way of thinking comes from Genesis itself. In 7:11 the flood is dated precisely to be in the 600th year Noah's life, and the 17th day of the second month. This degree of precision is highly unusual in scripture and is consistent with the flood being the start of a new epoch. In addition, the description of the flood is one of *de-creation*. Creation is undone. The order of destruction in Genesis 7:21 mirrors the order of creation in days 5 and 6. But the world is then reassembled in acts of re-creation. Dry land reappears from the water (8:1-5). Plants begin to grow (8:11). Noah is like a second Adam from whom the world is re-populated, and the creation command to "be fruitful and multiply" is re-issued (9:1). Noah is told to have dominion (9:2) and all nations are

descended from Noah (9:19). Noah is also like Adam in that he is portrayed as a man of obedience (6:22, 7:5) who later falls (9:21).

Peter sees the de-creation and re-creation of the flood as a parallel to the de-creation and re-creation associated with the second coming of Jesus. And Jesus makes the same link in his own teaching (e.g. Matthew 24:37-39). What is striking in what both Peter and Jesus say is that the original creation out of nothing is *not* the paradigm for the new creation, but the re-creation of the flood where a new world is made from existing material. This is consistent with the New Testament teaching that our resurrection bodies in the new creation will be transformed versions of our existing bodies.

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**“The flood is theologically significant because without it we are missing part of the story-line through which we interpret all history.”**

Understanding the flood correctly in its place in the story-line of the Bible has important implications for its scale. There is a thread of universality throughout Genesis 1-11, required by the Bible's story-line.

Davidson (1996) comments:

*"The theology of the flood is the pivot of a connected but multifaceted universal theme running through Genesis 1-11 and the whole rest of Scripture: creation, and the character of the Creator, in his original purpose for creation; uncreation, in humankind's turning from the Creator, the universal spread of sin, ending in universal eschatological judgement; and re-creation, in the eschatological salvation of the faithful remnant and the universal renewal of the earth."*

In other words the flood must be of the same universal scope as the original creation and the new creation (as also suggested by 2 Peter 3:5-7 which brings these three events together). We instinctively read Genesis 1 as describing the creation of the whole earth and the destruction of the flood is described in terms of wiping out what God created in chapter 1 (Genesis 6:6-7, 7:4) i.e. the flood is as extensive as the original creation (Davidson, 2000). Hence if it is argued that the flood is a local event, the creation described in Genesis 1 must also refer to the creation of a small part of the world.<sup>1</sup>

### **(2) All peoples: the flood inaugurates an era of abundant grace**

The second coming of Christ involves final judgement but it is more than this: it is the start of a sin-free world. Similarly the flood was a terrible, global judgement, but it was also the start of an era of grace to ensure sin would not triumph. The period between the flood and the second coming is an era of abundant grace centred on the death and resurrection of Christ (see figure 1).

Before the flood there was grace (for example Enoch walked with God, Genesis 5:24) but the world degenerated into rampant violence and perversion – a world spiralling out of control to self-destruction (Genesis 6:5&12). The hope inspired by Enosh (Genesis 4:26) when "men began to call on the name of the Lord" is long gone. Grace, it seems, has almost been snuffed out. The downward spiral is most graphically highlighted by the fact that there were only eight righteous people left by the time the flood came. The people of God across the entire earth were down to one family.

But after the flood there is a change: God makes a new (numerous) nation through Abraham. God's people increase and by the time we get to the end of the story, the people of God are a multitude that no man can number (Revelation 7:9).

There is also explicit teaching in the text that points to an era of grace beginning at the flood. First, as the flood reached its height "God remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:1). This the first time in Genesis that God is said to "remember", a word loaded with salvation significance: it means keeping a promise to save (Exodus 2:24).



Secondly, there is a striking contrast between what God says before the flood (Genesis 6:5-7) and after the flood (Genesis 8:21). Before the flood God is grieved over sin and his response is judgement. After the flood God echoes the words of 6:5 about man being incurably and perpetually sinful but says that this is now a *reason* why there will not be another flood.<sup>2</sup> So before the flood sin is a reason to bring judgement, after the flood sin is a reason to show mercy (Moberly, 2009). That promise of grace is the reason there is not an endless cycle of increasing sin, followed by universal judgement. The different response is prompted by Noah's offering (Genesis 8:20), a sacrifice that points forward to the cross.

We are still in this era of grace beginning at the flood as 2 Peter 3:9 makes clear. The "delay" in the second coming is to give more time to repent.

The era of grace is reflected in changes in creation itself as a result of the re-creation of the flood. This re-creation does not lead to a sin-free world like the new creation, but it does lead to a world more suited to sin than the original creation. It is a world in which the damage and destruction sin can cause is limited so humanity does not destroy itself completely. For example, the dramatic reduction in life-spans after the flood was a mercy in that it limited the damage one individual can cause: just imagine a leader like Stalin

living for 900 years. In addition, the climate changes and frequent natural disasters after the flood would have made it harder to grow food, so more human energy would need to be spent on survival rather than fighting. The creation of nations would also help to limit the concentration of power (see God's concern in Genesis 11:6).

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2 Peter 3:7 notes that it is our present world, the world shaped by the flood, that awaits destruction (and re-creation 3:13) when Jesus comes again. It is *our* world that has already seen resurrection life, the in-breaking of new creation, not the world before the flood. Even the suffering present in our post-flood world is understood by Jesus as “birth pains” of the new creation

(Matthew 24:7-8).<sup>3</sup> In other words the re-creation of the flood is the first step pointing in hope towards the birth of the new creation when Jesus comes again.

So far under this heading I have argued that the flood inaugurates an era of abundant grace. I will now turn to consider who is included in this era of grace. Genesis is very explicit. The post-flood promises apply to Noah and his descendents and the animals that were rescued in the ark (Genesis 9:9-10). If there were other people and animals who were not affected by the flood (as would be the case in a local flood) the covenant God made after the flood, symbolised by the rainbow (9:12), would not apply to them.

This has direct implications for us today because of the gospel promise made to Noah's descendant, Abram in Genesis 12:3: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Which “peoples” are included in this promise? Given the context this must refer to the nations who emerged from the confusion of Babel (11:9), peoples who are explicitly said to have descended from Noah's sons (9:19, 10:32). In other words the promise of a Saviour, a descendent of Abraham is for peoples (nations) descended from Noah's sons. If the flood were merely a local event there would be many people alive today who are not descendents of Noah. They would not be included in Abram's promise.



The waters rose greatly on the earth and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. © andrej67, www.shutterstock.com

It is only on the basis of a global flood, destroying all people apart from Noah's family that we can consistently understand Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) as universal, applying to all humanity including nations not known to the New Testament writers.

In summary, when we understand the place of the flood within the story-line of the Bible it is clear that only a global flood provides a consistent basis for the promises made to Noah and Abraham applying to all the world's nations today.

Under this second heading I have focused on the *anthropological* universality of the flood. In the final section I will turn to the theological significance of the flood affecting the whole Earth, not just people.<sup>4</sup>

### (3) All things: salvation involves the whole of creation

Christ's work of salvation involves the reconciliation of "all things" (Colossians 1:20). Salvation is not just about individual sinners finding forgiveness and a body-less life in heaven, but a new creation where believers have physical resurrection bodies in a cosmos that has been re-created. The flood is where this hope for the physical world is first made explicit.

Self-evidently the flood affects more than humanity alone. Animals are killed. Plants are destroyed. The very ground is no longer dry land. In Genesis 6:13 God explicitly says he is going to destroy the Earth as well as the people and animals. As was discussed earlier the flood is an act of de-creation, a judgement on creation itself. But why is creation aside from humanity under judgement? If the problem was merely human sin then surely an appropriate judgement would be to strike all humans dead through a plague or suchlike? The fact that God sends a flood indicates something is wrong with the whole of creation. Genesis 6 makes clear that it is not just

mankind that is the problem. Genesis 6:11 says the Earth had become "corrupt", an obvious contrast to Genesis 1:31 where all God had made was "very good" (Clines (1972-3) p.133). *All flesh*<sup>5</sup> had become corrupt (6:12) – a term defined within the flood account as including animals as well as humans (7:15,16, 21). Animals were violent as well as people (6:13) and this explains why God was grieved at having made animals as well as people in Genesis 6:7. In other words the animals were not behaving in the way he had made them in the beginning. Animals have transgressed their created status under man, and while originally vegetarian (Genesis 1:30) now prey upon man (9:5).

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Clearly animals are not sinful in the sense of being moral agents consciously choosing to disobey God's commands, but they are part of a creation that has been thrown into rebellion against its creator because of man's sin. It is a world where "natural laws are broken by all levels of created beings" (Clines (1972-3) p.134).

Given that the behaviour of animals and the sinful actions of man are both anti-creational – crossing the boundaries and order set by the creator – the judgement of the flood, dismantling creation is a fitting punishment. In the flood, the boundary between land and sea is crossed, the "breath of life" (2:7) is taken away (7:22) and the Earth which has become "corrupt" (literally "destroyed") is itself destroyed (6:13) (Clines (1972-3) p.135).

In the story-line of the Bible the flood is the first of many judgements in which creation beyond mankind is also included (e.g. Exodus 7:14-11:5, Jeremiah 7:20, Zephaniah 1:2-3, Revelation 8:7-12). But it is also the first time that the redemption of creation is revealed. God

"remembers" the animals as well as Noah (8:1) as the waters start to recede.

The recreation of the Earth after the flood is essential to Noah's own rescue. God could have saved Noah and his family by taking them off the Earth to live in a spiritual world. Instead he saves them with a boat made of wood, and makes a new physical world for them to live in. It is with the actions of a righteous man (6:9) that creation is rescued. Strikingly, Noah's name (5:29) means comfort or rest, understood in terms of bringing rest from the curse that has affected the ground. In other words Noah's mission was not only to preserve human life and limit human violence, it was to bring hope that the toil brought through the curse of creation would be relieved.

It is not hard to see in Noah a type of Christ, the truly righteous man, whose sacrifice on a wooden cross rescues us from judgement, and whose bodily resurrection signals the promise of a new creation. But Noah also anticipates the "sons of God" whose bodily resurrection will be accompanied by the liberation of the whole of creation (Romans 8:19-23).

Noah's flood is the first time that we discover that the salvation promised in Genesis 3:15 is not only the spiritual salvation of the souls of individual sinners, but the redemption of the whole of creation. God loves creation. The Christian hope is physical. We will live with God, in resurrected bodies, in a new creation.

### Conclusion

If these theological lessons flow from the flood then Noah's flood, including its extent, *must* matter. With so much at stake theologically, we are compelled to develop scientific models that are consistent with a global flood in human history. And we are also compelled to give the flood a far more prominent place in our theology of creation and salvation. ■

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Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. © Glashout, www.shutterstock.com



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#### End Notes

1. The idea of a local creation was suggested by John Pye Smith in 1840. The arguments against Smith's interpretation as set out for example by Ramm (1955) work just as well against understanding Genesis 6-8 as describing a local flood.
2. The New International Version tries to smooth over the tension in this verse by suggesting that God shows mercy in spite of man's sin rather than because of man's sin. For sin to be a reason to show mercy doesn't make sense to human reason, but that is the whole point about God's grace – it goes beyond human reason!
3. Intriguingly, the troubles that Jesus cites (national warfare, earthquakes and famines) are all features of the post-flood world. (Assuming that famines are the result of disrupted weather patterns post-flood).
4. The flood may have affected creation beyond the planet Earth. In this section, even where I use the more general term "creation", my focus is on the Earth because it is the effects on the Earth which are made explicit in the biblical text.
5. Here I am quoting from the New Revised Standard Version which, unlike the New International Version (which I have quoted elsewhere), does not wrongly translate "all flesh" as only humans.

# Naturalism's tightening grip on education and science

## David J. Tyler

Within the UK, we have a large number of vocal and influential people who want to exclude all expressions of biblical Christianity from education, whether state funded or independent. Their first target is to banish the concept of creation and replace it with the exclusive teaching of evolutionary theory. These crusaders present themselves as speaking for Enlightenment science and they make much of the supposed consensus within the scientific community about these issues. Their latest success has come with the Department for Education (DfE) requiring church schools converting to academies to adhere strictly to the evolutionary account of origins when

teaching science.

The new development has been warmly welcomed by the British Humanist Association's Head of Public Affairs Pavan Dhaliwal: "Coupled with the fact that maintained schools must follow the national curriculum, which from September will include a module on evolution at the primary level – the other thing we called for – we believe that this means that the objectives of the campaign are largely met. We congratulate the Government on its robust stance on this issue."

In one sense, the policy has not changed – merely spelled out again. This is how a spokesperson for the DfE put it: "It is already the case that all state schools,

including academies, are prohibited from teaching creationism as scientific fact. That has not changed. The funding agreements for academies and free schools have been restructured into one document and drafted in plain English, as part of an ongoing process of simplification."

However, we should note that there have been some significant changes from the earlier documents. Science has been redefined, as has creationism. The wording is overtly an expression of naturalistic philosophy: the principle that nature is all there is. In 2007, some guidelines were produced that had a definition of science that was acceptable to creationists and evolutionists. It read: "Science: the