

## Foreword: The Flood Narrative Then and Now

*God, Land and the Great Flood* explores what the ancient Hebrews likely understood when they heard the Flood Narrative. We hope that this exploration will provide intellectual and spiritual reassurance for thoughtful Christians who are unable to ignore the empirical evidence that runs contrary to the usual understandings of the ancient text. Too often modern readers assume that the way they understand the narrative duplicates the way *the original bearers* understood it. We believe this assumption is mistaken.

### The authority of the Biblical text

We are writing this book with the conviction that the authority of the Biblical text derives from the meaning that was communicated when the inspired author addressed his initial audience. Since we believe that the author was guided by the Holy Spirit, we believe that the message was essentially what God intended for that audience. But *we are not* that audience. So when we read the Bible, we are reading messages that were not addressed to us; we are, in effect, reading someone else's mail (or e-mail, or text messages). However, saying that the Bible was not addressed *to us* is not at all saying that the Bible was not intended *for us*. In a very real sense it was written for us, but the authority of the text lies in the God-inspired message that was given to *them*.

The Biblical Flood narrative was addressed to ancient Hebrews, explaining how and why the catastrophe had occurred and how God had graciously acted to guarantee that humanity and all living things would survive and thrive. If the authority of that message lies in what it communicated to those who first heard it, then we, prayerfully and thoughtfully receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, should determine what meanings await our discovery in God's message to the original audience. We are, after all, listening in on a conversation between the original inspired author and the original hearers.

In this process it is critically important for us to understand what Hebrew words such as *'erets* meant to that audience, for that is where our personal quest for meaning in the narrative must begin. Only after we feel in our bones what the narrative meant *to them* are we in a position to determine what it means *for us*.

### "God, Land and the Great Flood"

This book is a sequel to our prior effort, *God, Sky and Land: Genesis 1 as the Ancient Hebrews Heard It*. That book was an attempt to take the reader back into the world of the ancient Hebrews and so to experience the events of Creation as they relived them each time they heard the Creation story. To accomplish this task, we translated the words of the original Hebrew text into equivalent English language, taking great care to avoid any English words that would lead the modern reader to images and concepts that could not have been visualized or comprehended by the initial audience. This book continues that approach.

For example, we translated the Hebrew word *'erets* as "land" rather than "earth" because the word "earth" heard by us moderns in a cosmological context consistently evokes an image—Planet Earth. We envision this inevitably because we know that we live on a spherical planetary body, the third one out in a sun-centered system. Those who first heard the Genesis story (read or retold) lived in a totally different world. They lived in a *land* under the protection of a "vault" (or "dome") that kept the waters of *tehom*, the Great Deep, from over-

whelming that *land*—at least that was the case until the land was inundated by a Great Flood. This book is about their record of that event.

Their world was every bit as real to them as our entirely different world is to us. We envision a bluish planet, swathed in clouds, outlined against the blackness of space. Unless we recognize this radical difference between their world and ours we remain puzzled and confused—as puzzled and confused as we often are when we read someone else’s email without having them there to explain it.

### The Original Hearers Version (OHV)

“Retrotranslation” is our term for the process of translating an ancient Hebrew text into 21<sup>st</sup>-century English using only words that do not convey modern images (such as Planet Earth) and relatively recent understandings (like an expanding universe). The images that could be visualized by them undergirded their understanding of who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. The result of “retrotranslation” is thus a very literal Hebrew-into-English text that we have dubbed the Original Hearers Version (OHV).

*Science*, *nature*, and even *miracle*—explanatory concepts central to our thinking as we contemplate the Great Flood—were missing from ancient Hebrew minds and they remained missing from the minds of all humans for a very long time. The records they have left us speak of a God who acted in the world—in ordinary ways most of the time, and in extraordinary ways some of the time. God’s “ordinary actions” of their day are now usually included in our modern concept *nature*. Interestingly, God’s “extraordinary actions” are now often described as “acts of God” if they are horrifying occurrences such as earthquakes, landslides or tsunamis, or as “miracles” if they are beneficial and cannot be explained by science.

Thus it was that, listening to the Flood narrative, the first audience heard of an unimaginable catastrophe brought about by God acting in an extraordinary manner in response to human wickedness. While initially punitive, in the end God effected the survival of humankind. As we in the twenty-first century process the same Flood narrative, we think in *scientific* terms of *nature’s* laws; and for elements of the narrative for which this strategy fails, we default to *miracle*. What, as nearly as we can tell, did the original audience actually hear in listening to an account of the catastrophic Flood?

And how does what *they* heard and understood *then* lead to what *we* should hear and understand *now* about who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us?