

## God, Land, and the Great Flood

# Chapter One: Looking Carefully at the Narrative

## One Flood Narrative or Two Flood Accounts?

Old Testament scholars have generally concluded that, on close examination, the narrative of the Great Flood in Genesis 6–9 represents an interweaving or blending together of two originally different accounts. The combining of the two accounts was likely done several centuries before Christ. One of the striking features of the Biblical narrative we now have is that some parts refer to God by the usual Hebrew word for deity (*'Elohim*) while other parts use a Hebrew proper name (*Yahweh*) which seems to have come from the Hebrew verb meaning “to be” and thus points to “the One Who (Always) Is,” or “the One Who Brings into Being.” It is often further supposed that this difference in vocabulary indicates there were originally two different authors, each with their own account.

Other scholars reject the idea of two different accounts with different authors, opting instead for a single account. They insist that *Yahweh* and *'Elohim* were simply alternative names for God—the word *'Elohim* referring to the role and function of deity, and the word *Yahweh* serving as a proper name. Although they recognize that the Hebrew text we have is often repetitive, they believe that this characteristic is best understood in the light of the repetition that characterizes Hebrew poetry. They also note that the text has an artfully balanced chiasmic (x-shaped) structure that is most readily understood as the work of a single author. At this point, advocates of two original accounts and two original authors reply that the text we now have is the work of a skillful inspired editor.

Accompanying the two different divine names are other differences in phraseology – underlined below – that also appear to be author-specific. They are conveniently collected in Genesis 7:1-5, a passage that is bookended by the sacred divine name YHWH (regarded by ancient Hebrews as too holy to be spoken, but now often pronounced *Yahweh*, if spoken at all).

Then the LORD [YHWH] said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” And Noah did all that the LORD [YHWH] had commanded him.

With these clues, we can identify the paragraphs that belong to the YHWH account within the text of Gen. 5:32-8:22 in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) cited on the following pages.

### **If there were two original accounts, why might we want to recognize them?**

The suggestion of two sources best explains some otherwise puzzling aspects of the narrative. For example, the combined Flood narrative has Noah in something of a predicament: God (*'Elohim*) tells him, “of every living thing, of all you shall bring two into the ark” (Gen. 6:19; 7:14-15), but the LORD (YHWH) tells him to take in “seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate” (Gen. 7:2). Worse yet, God (*'Elohim*) specifies two (one pair) of each kind of bird while the LORD (YHWH) wants fourteen (seven pairs). If there were different accounts, the different numbers are readily explained. Also, the repetitions (often called “doublets”) are best explained as an interweaving of different source materials.

Recognizing two sources is a helpful reminder that the Bible is not a dictated message from God, but a product of people (not puppets) who were expressing their own inspired (and inspiring) understanding.

## The LORD [YHWH] Account

After Noah was five hundred years old he became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

Then the LORD [YHWH] said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years."

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

The LORD [YHWH] saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD [YHWH] was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD [YHWH] said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD [YHWH]

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God ['Elohim]. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's ['Elohim's] sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God ['Elohim] saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.

And God ['Elohim] said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.

Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.

For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.

Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them."

Noah did this; he did all that 'Elohim commanded him.

## The God ['Elohim] Account

After Noah was five hundred years old he became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

Then the LORD [YHWH] said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years."

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For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.

Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them."

Noah did this; he did all that 'Elohim commanded him.

## The LORD [YHWH] Account

Then the LORD [YHWH] said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the *birds of the air* also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in *seven days* I will send rain on the earth for *forty days and forty nights*; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the *face of the ground*.”

<sup>5</sup>And Noah did all that the LORD [YHWH] had commanded him.

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.

Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God [‘Elohim] had commanded Noah.

And after *seven days* the waters of the flood came on the earth.

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.

The rain fell on the earth *forty days and forty nights*.

On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. <sup>16</sup>And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God [‘Elohim] had commanded him

And the LORD [YHWH] shut him in. [Gen 7:5b]

The flood continued *forty days* on the earth.

The waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; <sup>20</sup>the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.

And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings.

Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the *face of the ground*, human beings and animals and creeping things and *birds of the air*; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark

## The God [‘Elohim] Account

Then the LORD [YHWH] said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.”

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And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

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.

The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. <sup>16</sup>And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God [‘Elohim] had commanded him

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## The LORD [YHWH] Account

.And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

But [And] God ['Elohim] remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God ['Elohim] made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.

At the end of *forty days* Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.

Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the *face of the ground*; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another *seven days*, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another *seven days*, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth.

Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the *face of the ground* was drying.

In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God ['Elohim] said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."

So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD [YHWH] and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD [YHWH] smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD [YHWH] said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

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At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.

Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

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