

## God, Land, and the Great Flood

# Chapter Two: Seven Words That Shape the Biblical Narrative

A good translation conveys to the reader as accurately as possible what the message meant to the original audience. It is then the task of the scholar and/or homilist to interpret that original meaning in the context of our current existence. Understanding what the text *meant then* is the necessary starting point for an understanding of what it *means now*. Today we consider seven Hebrew words describing the cause of the Flood and the length of a Flood day, in order to make sure that what we picture as we read the Biblical text is as close as we can come to what the author and original audience pictured. For this process to succeed, *we* have to get inside *their* heads and think *their* thoughts in a world that was very different from *ours*.

The Hebrew words we consider all have traditional English counterparts. But a “perfect” translation is impossible, because words in one language do not have exact equivalents in another language. Our aim here is to try to determine the English words that best convey the original Hebrew meaning.

### Sources of the Flood—Four Words

According to the Biblical narrative, the Flood began when “all the *fountains* of the *great deep* burst forth, and the *windows* of the *heavens* were opened” (7:11)<sup>1</sup> and began to subside when “the *fountains* of the *deep* and the *windows* of the *heavens* were closed” (8:2). The picturesque language is interesting and significant.

#### “Springs” or “fountains” (*ma‘eyenoth*) → eruptions of water

The Hebrew word *ma‘eyenoth* occurs 23 times in the Old Testament and is translated (NRSV) as “springs” (16 times), as “fountains” (6 times), and “wells” (once). Only in Genesis 7:11 and 8:2 is it coupled with *tehom*, the “deep” or “great deep”; here these “fountains” seem to have been pictured as the means by which the waters “under the earth” (Ex. 20:4) were forcefully delivered to the inhabited world as a major factor in the catastrophe of the Great Flood. These “fountains” were certainly not volcanoes as some recent interpretations have suggested. Volcanoes are absent from the Hebrew Bible because no active volcanoes have existed from Bible times until now in Canaan or in the territory between Canaan and Egypt. Besides, watery upsurges from the depths are the very antithesis of fiery outbursts of molten rock.

#### “Deep” or “great deep” (*tehom*) → primeval waters

The references to “great deep” or simply “deep” remind us of the narrative of Creation in which “darkness covered the face of the deep; and a wind from God [or the spirit of God] swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). The word *tehom* refers to primeval waters that existed when the Creation narrative begins. They were divided by the *raqia* (“dome” or “vault”) into waters that were “above” and “below” (1:7). Although some other ancient accounts of Creation suppose that God had to overcome resistance of one sort or another in the process of producing a habitable world, the Biblical account emphasizes the simplicity of divine omnipotence: God “spoke and it came to be” (Ps. 33:9). Creation begins with the division of the primeval waters.

#### “Windows,” “openings” (*‘arubboth*) → floodgates

“Windows” is used in two quite different senses in this story. In Hebrew as in English, when “windows” is joined with “heavens” [Heb. *shemayim*], it typically describes the means through which lavish outpourings come to the world, for good or for ill. These “windows of heaven” were the second source of primeval waters. By this means, the waters, held in place “above” the dome [*raqia*] since creation, came down upon the land. A commonplace window is mentioned later in the narrative: “Noah opened the window [Heb. *challon*] of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven” (Gen. 8:6-7).

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

### **“Heavens,” “sky” (*shemayim*) → the dome (*raqia*)**

Plural in form, the Hebrew word translated “the heavens” or simply “heaven” has a broad semantic range similar to that of its English counterpart—including the various realms of the clouds, the stars, and God. But there is a major difference. To us, the realm of the stars is the “astronomical universe”; to them it was simply what they saw stretched out above their heads when they looked up—the vault or dome into which God had set the stars, as well as the sun and moon (Gen. 1:17). In this sense the sky (*shemayim*) and the dome (*raqia*) were practically synonymous. God had earlier “called the dome Sky (1:8)”; “The *shamayim* are telling the glory of God; and the *raqia* proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). Looking up we too see the sky, but we know that there is no dome between us and outer space. To us, then, the sky is quite different.

The phrase “windows of heaven” appears again in a description of impending divine judgment (Isa. 24:18), and in a promise of “an overflowing blessing” to those who are faithful in tithing (Mal. 3:10).

### **Days of the Flood—Three Words**

The Biblical narrative of the Flood twice says that the flood surged for “forty days” (7:17; 8:6), twice also saying that the rain fell for “forty days and forty nights” (7:4, 12). What is the significance, if any, of the fact that the narrator sometimes clarified that forty days also included forty nights, and sometimes did not? For an answer, we need to recall the narrative of Creation.

#### **“Day” (*yom*) → daylight hours, workday, period between dawn and dusk**

According to the Creation narrative, “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Gen. 1:5). For the ancient Hebrews the day began with dawn and ended with dusk. It certainly did not begin (as it does for us) with a dark period from midnight to dawn, continue with a light period from dawn to dusk, and then conclude with another dark period from dusk to midnight. This sort of “day” can be traced back only as far as Hipparchus, a Greek astronomer and mathematician whose work took place primarily between 147 and 127 B.C.E. Hipparchus proposed dividing the night into 12 equal segments so as to match the 12 segments into which the daylight hours had been divided from antiquity. He further specified that this be done at equinox, when the length of day precisely equaled the length of the night. By then clocks had been invented that could mark off the hours even at night when the sun, the great original timekeeper, was no longer visible.

#### **“Morning” (*boqer*) → dawn, break of day**

Morning denotes the beginning of “day,” the coming of light after a night of darkness. For the Hebrews, lacking any other timekeeper than the sun, it marked the beginning of the “first hour,” for their “day” was divided into twelve hours. Midday was thus the sixth hour and dusk the twelfth hour—all judged by the position of the sun in the sky. Time could not be “told” (announced) at night because the sun was not visible. For this reason the night was divided not into hours but into “watches,” for the length of elapsed nighttime could be roughly estimated by how long a certain amount of oil took to burn in a lamp. Because “hours” were divisions of daylight, they were longer in summer than in winter. This curious outcome is confirmed by drawings of the mechanism of several pre-Hipparchus water clocks, which had a mechanism for making the “hours” longer in the summer.

#### **“Evening” (*'ereb*) → twilight, mixture of light and darkness**

Evening was the time when “day” (*yom*) terminated and was replaced by “night.” It was not a stand-in for night. There is a perfectly good Hebrew word for the period of darkness between “evening” and “morning,” namely, *layil*, translated “night” more than 250 times in the Hebrew Bible. Now we understand why it was to rain “forty days and forty nights.” (Gen. 7:4) but “at the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark” (8:6). The narrator wanted to make it clear that it rained continuously, day-and-night, and so specified. Otherwise his hearers might well have concluded that it rained only during the daytime and that the rain ceased every night (the antithesis, perhaps, of Camelot where it rained only at night!) When, however, the narrator was referring simply to a period of time, such explicit detail was quite unnecessary. For the ancient Hebrew authors and their audiences, “day” (*yom*) meant daylight-time ~12 hours, not our 24 hours.

Thus quite legitimate word selections by translators can change the Flood narrative from the different (and to our ears strange) narrative they heard *then* to the familiar one we hear *now*.