

## Chapter Four: The Flood Accounts and Explanatory Concepts

### Some Questions

With the retrotranslations of the YHWH and the Elohim accounts in hand, it is now time to address some of the many questions they raise. There are the well-known scientific questions: (1) Did the Flood actually happen? (2) Was it really world-wide? (3) How could all the animals and birds fit into the ark? (4) How could kangaroos get there from Australia (and back again) without leaving fossils en route? (5) How were the problems of food and waste solved? Even more daunting are the theological questions: (1) How could God, who, as described by Jesus, notes a falling sparrow (Matt. 10:29; Luke 12:6) commit the greatest genocide in human history? (2) How could God, who had created humans and their world and pronounced everything “very good” (Gen. 1:29), now express regret at having created them in the first place (Gen. 6:6-7)?

The retrotranslations in the previous chapter have been put together using English words conveying only concepts that, as best as we can determine, would have been meaningful to the ancient Hebrews in the light of *their* experience and information—concepts far different from ours in both amount and content. Before we can bring the ancient message forward to the present, we have to take ourselves *back* (as best we can) to the far different conceptual world of the *original bearers*. That is why we have designated the retrotranslated text the “Original Hearers Version” (OHV).



To assist in answering the questions evoked by the text, we now introduce two imaginary characters. The first is Moshe He'eb, an ancient (but not elderly by our standards) Hebrew. According to his experience and understanding of reality—the sun goes across the sky above the flat Earth, a vast ocean of primeval water is held above the sky, etc.—Moshe thinks like the ancient Hebrew he is; he could not possibly think otherwise. Our second imaginary character is Ian Michael O'Dern (“I'Modern”). Living at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he thinks about the physical world in the same way the rest of us do, which conditions the way most modern theists think about everything, including God. The best approach to the scientific and theological issues in the Flood narrative is to examine the difference between the way Moshe's mind functioned *then* and the way Ian Michael's mind functions *now*.



The rest of this book explores this profound difference, which is inevitably obscured by the simple fact that we read the Flood accounts in more-or-less modern English.

A distinguishing characteristic of humanness is our fundamental need to explain things—first to ourselves (as “understanding”) and then to others (as “explanation”). We are not just curious; we need *explanations* for every aspect of reality—every *thing* that exists and every *event* that happens. So a child asks, “Daddy, why is the sky blue?” These understandings and explanations attempt to meet two needs: we not only want to know the *processes* by which things come to be and events occur; we also want to know the *purposes and meanings* of these things and events. So we have the ongoing activities of science and theology.

Not so obvious but just as important is the fact that some of the mental tools we constantly use are *explanatory concepts*, with which we understand and explain why there is “something” rather than nothing, how that “something” functions, and what (if anything) it means. For linguistic convenience and verbal economy we will refer to explanatory concepts as “*explanacepts*.” These are tools with which we think and with which the ancient Hebrews thought. Our set of explanacepts, however, is significantly different from theirs—and therein lies the reason for our major questions.

### Explanacepts in Action—The Episode of the Quail

As far as we can tell from the Old Testament, Moshe had only two explanacepts with which to understand whatever he saw, heard, or felt. For him everything was the result of either human or of suprahuman action. In other words, either some human did it, or God (or Satan, the Enemy) did it.

Fleeing from Egypt, the Hebrews famously complained about their lack of food, and Moses and Aaron told them that YHWH had heard their complaints and would shortly send them meat. At sunset, a flock of quail descended upon the camp (Ex. 16:2-3, 11-13). No one thought of a natural phenomenon such as migrating birds, exhausted from a long flight across the Mediterranean Sea. It was simply that God acted and food arrived. More than two years later in a second episode, “a wind went out from YHWH and drove in quail from the sea. . . . All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. . . . The anger of YHWH burned against the people and he struck them with a severe plague” (Num. 11:31-33). Here as before YHWH is credited for the quail, but now an additional factor is needed to explain why God, who sent quail for food, now sends quail that are lethally toxic. Moshe’s other explanaccept supplies the factor: the people’s excessive craving for food. With his two available explanaccepts—suprahuman and human—he could understand that the visitation of death was due to something the people had done to anger God: human action evoked divine action. Thus the location came to be known as “Graves of Craving” (Num. 11:34).

If, however, Ian Michael and his friends were traveling through a desert and some of them became seriously ill after eating quail, Ian Michael would react very differently, because his mental toolkit contains the explanaccept *nature*, with the regularities (“laws”) that have been identified by science. He would not employ Moshe’s two explanaccepts (divine and human action); instead, consulting Google or Wikipedia, he would discover that flocks of European migratory quail travel, in the fall, from Europe to their breeding grounds in sub-Saharan Africa. Sometimes the quail stop off in a group of Mediterranean islands including the island of Lesbos and gorge themselves on the ripe seeds of red hemp nettle plants. These seeds contain an alkaloid that is harmless to birds but makes quail flesh toxic to mammals. It causes mammalian muscle cells to rupture and release myoglobin into the blood stream, and in sufficient quantity this protein shuts down the kidneys and causes death. Learning this, Ian Michael would get his friends to the nearest hospital for kidney dialysis as soon as possible. The explanaccept *nature*—the functioning of natural law—would provide all the explanation Ian Michael needed.

### **Moshe’s Explanaccepts and the Flood**

The relevance of the toxic quail experience to the Flood narrative is obvious. An examination of the Biblical narrative in any translation confirms that Moshe had only two explanaccepts, so that everything that happened was the result of either human or suprahuman factors (or both). There is no mention of *natural* factors that could make quail meat toxic to humans. That explanaccept was still more than 2,000 years in the future, it would result from a very large accumulation of human experience and information. For the author(s) and original audience(s) of the Flood accounts, the only conceivable causal factors were humans (Noah and others) and suprahuman (God):

*In the YHWH account:* Noah fathered Shem, Ham and Japheth (5:32). YHWH said. “Let their days be” (6:3). The sons of God took wives and mated (6:2-4). Women bore children (6:4). YHWH saw (6:5). YHWH was sorry (6:6). YHWH said, “I will wipe out people, animals, creeping things, birds of the sky” (6:7). Noah found grace in YHWH’s sight (6:8). YHWH told Noah (7:1). “I [YHWH] will send” (7:4). “I [YHWH] will erase” (7:4). Noah did everything that YHWH had commanded him (7:5). YHWH shut him [Noah] in (7:6).

*In the Elohim account:* Noah had three sons (6:10). Elohim saw (6:12). Elohim said (6:13). “I [Elohim] have decided” (6:13). “I [Elohim] am going to destroy” (6:13). “I [Elohim] am going to bring a flood” (6:17). “I [Elohim] will establish my covenant (6:18). “You [Noah] are to come” (6:18). “You [Noah] are to bring” (6:19). “Also [Noah] take food” (6:21). Noah did all that Elohim commanded him (6:22).

The key to understanding the Biblical narrative of the Flood, like the antecedent accounts it combines, is to recognize that it originated in a two-explanaccept world. Only in this way will we successfully address the questions with which this chapter began and truly understand its message for us who no longer live in a two-explanaccept world. So far from criticizing the Biblical text, we are respecting it by listening to it as closely and carefully as we can.