

How the Flood Narrative Illustrates the Nature of Holy Scripture

Inspiration and Canonization

Most Christians regard Holy Scripture as “inspired,” but they seldom have a clear idea of what that actually means. For some, Scripture is infallible and inerrant; for others it means that the words of the Bible were God’s own words. But the phenomena of the existing text of the Bible (such as the narrative discrepancies among the four Gospels) do not confirm these ideas. So what should we understand by the “inspiration” of Scripture?

Few Bible passages refer directly to the nature of Scripture and the processes that produced it. Old Testament prophets often said, “The word of the LORD came to me,” but they did not define exactly *how* the divine word “came” to them. A New Testament author said that Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV), but “God-breathed” has been interpreted to mean anything from “motivated” to “dictated.” Another author said that, “moved by the Holy Spirit,” prophets “spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21), but that still doesn’t give us a specific answer to our question.

However the process unfolded under the Spirit’s guidance, the inclusion of a particular document in Scripture was the consensus decision of a believing community. Documents were selected to be preserved because the community had collectively found them spiritually and practically valuable. Time was involved, and the decision was seldom made during the author’s lifetime. And this decision was only the first step in determining whether a document was finally included in the canon because it was recognized as “inspired” and therefore authoritative. The authors of the Elohim and Yahweh accounts of the Great Flood did not make the decision that their accounts were worthy of being copied and preserved for posterity. That decision was made by others. Still others confirmed the decision—by copying and so preserving the accounts—during the following centuries.

The Explanaccept *Divine Action*



As we encounter reality, we all use explanaccepts—explanatory concepts—to organize, understand, and relate to the world around us. As we have noted previously, the ancient Hebrews conceived of reality in terms of two kinds of active agency—*human action* and *divine* (or *suprahuman*) *action*. Of these, the preeminent agency was *divine action*, at times understood as involving a plurality of gods and/or demons. *Divine action* accounted for all entities and events other than those for which *human action* was the recognizable cause. Obviously *human action* did not bring the Great Flood upon the land (*'erets*); only *divine action* was powerful enough to have accomplished that.

As the ancient Hebrews processed the accounts of this disaster of unprecedented extent and severity, their *divine action* explanaccept was stretched to its limits. In a world with only two kinds of agency, the Flood could only have been caused by *divine action*. But although God was understood as taking full responsibility (“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 I made them,” Gen. 6:7), that same God not only warned Noah of the impending Flood but also told him how to survive it (6:13-16). God “remembered” him and the creatures with him in the ark and terminated the Flood (8:1-3), and afterwards promised never to do such a thing again (9:8-17). Because of the way the story of God’s Great Flood was recounted, the Hebrew generations that heard the narrative came

to view God differently. It was unequivocally *God's Flood*; from start to finish, the story was about *divine action*.

During the course of time, refinements of the explanaccept *divine action* occurred again and again. The call of Abraham and the promise that his descendants would inherit the land (*'erets*) inhabited by the Canaanites (Gen. 12:1-7), the argument that Abraham had with God over the number of righteous persons in Sodom (15:23), the conversation that Moses had with God on Mt. Sinai about who was really responsible for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex 33:1, 34:12-17)—all edified the original hearers and also refined the explanaccept *divine action* in the minds of the Moshe and his contemporaries.

This sequence was often repeated: an event occurred that was clearly not the result of *human action* and was therefore credited to *divine action*. Those who heard the account of that event saw a little more clearly who God is and understood a little better what God does. Guided by God's Spirit the community recognized the value of these accounts and chose to copy and preserve them. In this way, over many centuries the writings of many different authors were collected. All of these writings possessed a common hallmark: those who read them, or heard them read, understood a little more clearly and accurately who God was, what God did, and what God wanted for them. In short, these writings enhanced and clarified the explanaccept *divine action*; they were inspiring and recognized as "inspired," and so they became authoritative. After centuries had passed they also became "canonical."

What Inspiration Does

While we have not precisely defined the process of "inspiration," we have offered a tentative understanding of how inspiration *functioned*—how "God-breathed" speaking and writing made an impact, accomplished its purpose, and was preserved. Eventually these collected works were handed down to the Jewish rabbis of the late first century C.E. These rabbis decided to include them in the Old Testament canon. This, in turn, became the first part of Christian Scripture.

But perplexing questions remain. How is it that the God who is described as deliberately responsible for the genocidal Deluge is the God whom Jesus of Nazareth knew as his heavenly Father—the God who "loved the world in such a way that he gave his unique Son so that everyone who trusts in him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, our translation). If this is the ultimate, defining instance of *divine action*, how can *divine action* also account for the Great Flood? The answer lies in the fact that the Bible is a collection of documents preserved over hundreds of years. The community that decided to copy and preserve a specific document lived at a particular time and place. It based its decision on whether that document represented an advance in the collective understanding of *divine action*. In that way, especially valuable writings became the collection that is our Bible. These decisions were not necessarily made consciously and formally by something like a committee vote; the process may well have been more like an intuitive consensus, a general awareness that was powerful precisely because it was pervasive.

Thus we offer a tentative explanation of why the accounts of the Great Flood are part of Holy Scripture despite their depiction of a God who said, "I will blot out from the face of 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" (Gen. 6:7). For that time and that place, an account of a God interacting with humans to warn them of impending catastrophe, a God who "remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark" (8:1), a God who intervened to ensure the survival of the human race, represented a significant advance in the explanaccept *divine action* for *that time* and *that place*. That those early ideas of *divine action* needed (at least Ian Michael thinks they needed) significant improvement is not the point. The relevant question is whether these accounts *clarified for their hearers* who God is, what God does and what God wants for us human beings.

