

Global Flood, or Local? One Hebrew Word Yields the Answer

The narrative of the Great Flood would be radically different for all of us if as children we had learned that “the flood continued forty days on the land; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the land” (Gen. 7:17). Had we relied on the evidence Scripture provides—that the flood covered whatever land the ancient Bible writer knew about — we would have never envisioned a “global Flood”— a mass of water, held in place by gravity, surrounding and inundating a spherical planet more than 7,900 miles in diameter.

The Nature of Translations

All translations are interpretations. No matter how scrupulous the translator(s), a translation can not perfectly reproduce the precise meaning of the text in the original language. The reason is that in no two languages do corresponding words have exactly the same *semantic range* — that is, the same range of usage, and therefore of meaning. To complicate matters further, words acquire new usages as time passes and thus acquire new meanings.

So all translators of Scripture interpret the text they are translating. What translators give us is their best interpretation of what *they heard* the ancient Biblical text saying *to them*; and we in turn *interpret* what *they say they heard* and are saying *to us*. To read and hear Scripture accurately in translation, it is necessary to take account of *both* the original author(s)’ preconceptions and perspectives *and* the preconceptions and perspectives of the translator(s) of the version at hand. Our understanding of Scripture is profoundly influenced by the translations with which we are familiar. This is why prospective pastors are required to study the original Biblical Hebrew and Greek so they will be optimally equipped as Bible expositors.

The Meaning of *’erets* Then and Now

The influence of translations is especially apparent in the first 11 chapters of Genesis where translators have consistently rendered the Hebrew word *’erets* in a way that, unfortunately, is misleading. Ever since William Tyndale translated the Old Testament directly from Hebrew into English in 1530, *’erets* has almost always been rendered as “earth” in the Creation and Flood narratives. But, in the rest of the Bible, most of the time *’erets* has been translated as “land”— as in “the land of Egypt,” “the land of Israel,” “the land of Canaan,” “the promised land,” “the land flowing with milk and honey.” The predominant meaning is simply *territory*. Had Tyndale, or the King James Version translators (1611), used “land” instead of “earth,” readers ever since would have understood the narratives of Creation and the Flood much differently and more accurately.

The original Genesis text *could not* have referred to Planet Earth, the solar system of which it is a part, and the universe beyond, nor could later chapters in Genesis have referred to a “global” Flood. The earth as a planetary sphere within a heliocentric system in a galaxy that is part of a vast universe would not be known for yet another 2,000 years. However, this understanding (or at least major portions of it) was held by all Bible translators from the King James Version (KJV) onwards.

The translators of the KJV in the early chapters of Genesis, prior to the story of Abraham, rendered *’erets* as “earth” rather than “land” approximately 90% of the time, probably because they believed that *’erets* was being used in a “cosmological sense.” But — and this is the crux of the matter — to translate *’erets* as “earth” *creates* a cosmological sense for both *’erets* and its context. Translating *’erets* as “earth” when it first occurs in Scripture (Gen. 1:1) *establishes* a cosmological sense for the context (Gen 1-11). Only when the Abraham story begins does the “cosmological sense” lose its hold and from then on translators do better at communicating the authentic meaning of *’erets*. It seems likely that this is

responsible for the subsequent striking reversal in translation. In the rest of Genesis and the remainder of the Old Testament *'erets* (2,384 total occurrences) is rendered “earth” only 26% of the time. Hebrew to English translators, having a modern cosmological sense, understandably (although incorrectly) lead readers to believe that Genesis is answering modern “scientific” questions. Genesis has been made to talk about the sun — not the ‘greater light’ designated by God to illuminate the “land” and “rule the day” (1:16), but as a cosmological element, the gravitational center of a solar system, the parent star of Planet Earth.



Back to Moshe’s World?

Moshe is our paradigmatic ancient Hebrew. This far removed we cannot be sure what his worldview was, but we can be quite certain what it *could not have been*. Unfortunately, what it could not have been is precisely the world view that leads Ian Michael (our quintessential modern) to question whether the basic matter of the “earth” was created along with the universe an indefinite time (perhaps billions of years) ago and organized for life only recently (Old Earth, Young Life Creationism). He wonders if perhaps that the “earth” was created to sustain life a long time ago, was later destroyed and subsequently re-created in the relatively recent past (Ruin and Restoration Theory), or whether both the “earth” and the universe were created simultaneously a few thousand years ago (Young Earth Creationism). All these mental excursions are driven by *'erets* as “earth” rather than “land.”



In Tyndale’s day the word “earth” could mean something like soil or dirt — the foundational material on which a garden could be cultivated or a house built. Though it did not yet mean Planet Earth, in the appropriate setting it could mean the spherical body on which humans lived, situated by God at the appropriate center of physical reality. By the time of the King James Version “earth” in a “cosmological sense” referred to Planet Earth — still the home of mankind but now demoted from the center of everything. Thanks to Copernicus and Galileo Earth, in the interim, had become a satellite circling the sun.

The function of Bible translators is to make a foreign text readily accessible to contemporary readers much like themselves, so it is very easy for them to forget that they are translating a text that was not addressed to them or their world — a world with an understanding of *natural regularities*. This understanding of what we call the “Laws of Nature” was missing from Moshe’s world. It is very easy for translators to forget that the texts they are working on could not possibly answer questions that were first framed centuries after the original texts were composed.

Translations that still render *'erets* as “earth” continue to lead readers to envision something so cosmologically anachronistic as to have been historically impossible. The ancient narrators and their hearers understood — because their experience told them so — that their beloved *'erets* was firmly established as the center and basis of all known physical reality and that the sun moved across the sky above it. Moreover, the sacred scrolls they heard read on important religious occasions confirmed their common-sense understanding. The scrolls emphasized that their beloved land, centered as it was in the rest of reality, was proof of God’s creative goodness and sustaining power: “He set the land [*'erets*] on its foundations; it can never be moved” (Ps. 104:5 NIV). The idea that the Great Flood was a “global” catastrophe was literally inconceivable until humans became aware that they lived on an immense sphere. That conception awaited the insights of Greek philosophers many centuries after Genesis was composed.

And so discussions continue on the extent of the Great Flood. The statement that the waters “swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered” gives a very different perspective from the statement that the waters “swelled so mightily on the land...” There is no Biblical doubt regarding the reality of the Flood as a catastrophic event; its extent, however, is a very different matter. It has been affected not only by geological considerations but also (and we think decisively) by an unfortunate translation of *'erets*. That translation created for Genesis 1-11 a “cosmological context” that is ours, not — as it properly should have been — Moshe’s.