

FLOOD The story of the great flood is recounted in [Gen 6–9](#). When [God](#) sees that humanity has become corrupt, He brings a great flood upon the earth to wipe out every living thing—except [Noah](#), his family, and the animals with him on the [ark](#) that God instructed him to build. After the waters recede, [God](#) makes a new [covenant](#) with [Noah](#) and humanity.

Source and Composition of the Narrative

The flood account in [Gen 6–9](#) may be an editor’s composition which combines two different sources—”J” and “P” (Emerton, “The Unity of the Flood Narrative,” 402). Wenham observes a coherent unity in the story—“When [Genesis 6–9](#) is dissected into its constituent sources, two new versions of the flood story are produced, which differ both from each other and from the version we now find in [Genesis](#)” (Wenham, “Coherence of the Flood Narrative,” 336). The two-source flood narrative is depicted as follows (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 167):

	J	P	Editor
Flood announced/ ark built		Gen 6:9–22	
Command to enter ark	Gen 7:1–5		Gen 7:3a
Noah’s age		Gen 7:6	
Entry into ark	Gen 7:7	Gen 7:13–16a	Gen 7:8–9
Flood comes	Gen 7:10, 12	Gen 7:11	

Flood continues	Gen 7:17b	Gen 7:17a	
Flood destroys	Gen 7:22, 23a, c	Gen 7:18– 21, 24	Gen 7:23b
Flood abates	Gen 8:2b, 3a	Gen 8:1–2a, 3b–5	
Ark rests on mountain		Gen 8:4	
Window opened	Gen 8:6		
Birds depart	Gen 8:7–12		
<u>Earth</u> dry	Gen 8:13b	Gen 8:13a, 14	
Exit from ark		Gen 8:15–19	
<u>Sacrifice</u>	Gen 8:20– 22		
Covenant with all life		Gen 9:1–17	

Mathews suggests that the symmetrical nature of the flood story supports “one originally unified text.” He argues that “the proposed sources have significant gaps and the source division violates the inner cohesion of sentence and paragraph structures” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 354–55). He concludes, “the flood account exhibits a literary cohesion that can best be explained as the product of one hand” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 352–3).

Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Literature

Noah’s flood has numerous parallels in ancient Near

Eastern literature. The ancient Mesopotamian [Epic of Gilgamesh](#) records a flood account similar to [Gen 6–9](#). When the hero, Gilgamesh, seeks immortality, he encounters Utnapishtim—a “Noah” figure—who survived a great flood sent by the gods to destroy humankind by building an ark (Mathews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 25). The ancient [Babylonian](#) story of [Atrahasis](#) records a divine council that floods the earth to destroy all humans—except for Atrahasis and his family, who survived in an ark. The Sumerian text known as the [Eridu Genesis](#) also describes the gods’ plan to flood the world and how one god warns Ziusudra who makes a boat to survive the flood. Suggestions as to the relationship between these stories include:

- [Genesis](#) borrowed from the Mesopotamian literature
- Mesopotamian literature borrowed from [Genesis](#)
- Each emerged independently

Mathews notes, “it is now agreed that the Hebrew account was independent and the versions together testify to a widely remembered corpus of events” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 99). The overlap between the various accounts likely points to one flood event recorded by diverse spiritual communities.

The Flood as a Theological Account

[Genesis 6–9](#) advances the storyline of the Bible. Brueggemann states, “We do not have before us history, that is, a detailed account of what happened ... our interpretation will be distracted if there is insistence on finding data to prove this is a ‘historical’ narrative” (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 74). Von Rad points out, “As for the natural and historical aspect of the Flood problem, theology is not competent to express an independent opinion” (von Rad,

Genesis, 124). *Genesis* should be seen as a form of “biblical saga.” According to von Rad, the flood story probably had some historical beginning, but was then infused with narrative elements to make it relevant to the original audience (Rad, *Genesis*, 34). Fretheim concurs, “The *Genesis* account should be related to be a major flood in the Mesopotamian valley, which in time was interpreted as a flood that covered the then known world” (Fretheim, “*Genesis*,” 388). The presence of numerous flood stories in a wide variety of cultures “argues against literary interdependence, a common source, or reference to a single event ... it is clear that popular imagination has been at work magnifying local disastrous floods into catastrophes of universal proportions” (Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* 38).

Date of the Flood

The flood account may point to an actual historical event, though precise dating is difficult. Seely suggests it is possible to “make a rough chronological estimate for the date of the flood by employing the two 10-name genealogies in [Gen 5](#) and [11](#)” (Seely, “Noah’s Flood,” 291). Using both the biblical text and archaeological evidence, he places [Adam’s](#) earliest possible date as ⚡ 9000 BC (based on the geological record, the probable date for Adam is ⚡ between 5000 and 4000 BC). Including data from the [genealogy](#) from Adam to [Abraham](#), “the combined genealogies of [Gen 5](#) and [11](#) with the Flood at a midpoint between Adam and [Abraham](#) suggest a date ⚡ ca. 3500 to 3000 BC for the Flood” (Seely, “Noah’s Flood,” 293). Ryan and Pitman propose that the flood narrative can be traced to the creation of the Black Sea in ⚡ 5600 BC, when ocean water burst through the Bosphorus Straight in present-day Turkey (Ryan and Pitman, *Noah’s Flood* 188). Kidner tentatively points to a date “some millen-

nia before the Babylonian floods of פ around 3000 BC” (Kidner, Genesis, 103).

Extent of the Flood

The extent of the flood is also debated. Proponents of a global flood lean on biblical evidence and criticize what they see as illogical inconsistencies with the idea of a local flood. The arguments for a global flood are:

- The use of the word “all” (כָּל, *kol*) in the flood narrative is typically understood to be universal in nature—“I have determined to make an end of *all* flesh” (Gen 6:13 ESV). Verbs like “blot/wipe out” (מָחָה, *machah*) (Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23) combined with phrases like “every living thing” (כָּל־הַיְקוּמִים, *kol-hayqum*) (Gen 7:4) suggest that the flood destroyed all living things from the face of the earth.
- The flood narrative states that the waters covered “all the high mountains under the whole heaven” (Gen 7:19 ESV).
- If the flood were confined to one geographic region, Noah would simply move his family rather than construct the ark.
- The human race by the time of Noah had ample time to spread out globally. Hence, if God determined to wipe out “all flesh” (כָּל־בָּשָׂר, *kol-basar*) from the face of the earth, it would make the most sense for the flood to be universal.

Reactions to this theory include:

- Whitcomb and Morris conclude that “[e]xcept for the family of Noah, the entire [pre-flood] race of mankind,

widespread and hopelessly wicked, was destroyed by water” (Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, 87).

- Mathews suggests “all flesh/people” and “every living thing” ([Gen 6:12–13](#), 17) apply globally—“the cataclysm was worldwide in scope ... the insistence of the narrative on the encompassing character of the flood favors the literal understanding of the universal view” (Mathews, [Genesis 1–11:26](#), 365).
- Hamilton concurs with this approach as well—“elsewhere in the Flood story ‘all flesh’ includes both animals and people ([6:17](#), 19; [7:15](#), 16, 21; [8:17](#)), it is most likely all-inclusive in [6:12](#)” (Hamilton, [Genesis 1–17](#), 279). Although the phrase “all the earth” ([כְּלִי-הָאָרֶץ](#), *khol-ha'arets*) ([Gen 7:3](#)) can legitimately mean a local area of land, Hamilton concludes that it is best take it at face value—it refers to the entire globe (Hamilton, [Genesis 1–17](#), 273).

Proponents of a local or regional flood lean on the archaeological and geological record while incorporating the biblical story. The arguments for a local flood are:

1. “All” does not necessarily carry a universal sense—it may be used to refer to “some” or as an expression of large in number (Seely, “[Noah’s Flood](#),” 293–4; Mathews, [Genesis 1–11:26](#), 365; compare [Gen 41:56–7](#); [2 Sam 18:8](#); [Dan 6:25](#)).
2. Archaeological and geological records do not support a global, cataclysmic flood within the last 40,000 years. Seely’s research suggests “the only evidence of serious flooding in the Near East during that time period is from riverine floods ... we have no archaeological evidence for the Flood as it is described in Scripture” (Seely, “[Noah’s Flood](#),” 299; compare Carol Hill, “The Noachian

Flood,” 181).

3. There is insufficient water available globally to cover the earth to a depth of 8,000 feet (the average height of the mountains of Ararat). If all the rainwater were to pour out upon the earth, it would only “cover the ground to an average depth of less than two inches” (Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, 121). Even if all available groundwater is included in the flood account (compare [Gen 7:11](#)), “it would flood the earth to a depth of less than 60 feet” (Seely, “[Noah’s Flood](#),” 308).

Kidner concludes, “The events of [Genesis 6–8](#) must have taken place within a limited, though indeed a vast area, covering not the entire globe but the scene of the human story of the previous chapters” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 102). Seely offers a nuanced understanding of the extent of the flood—it was universal in the sense that it covered the entire known world to the author—possibly the Tigris River to the Euphrates River—yet regional in actuality (Hill, “The Noachian Flood,” 181). It can be connected to a real flood that occurred in [Mesopotamia](#) around 2900 BC. Such a view does not render the flood a myth—“The flood was a real, historical event that covered—not the whole world—but the whole of [Noah’s world](#)” (Hill, “The Noachian Flood,” 181).

Structure and Book Outline

The literary structure of the flood account is a palistrophe—a structure that builds up to a central point and then back. In this scheme, the “second half of the story is ... a mirror image of the first” (Wenham, [Genesis 1–15](#), 337). The flood story can be depicted as follows (Wenham, “Coherence of the Flood Narrative,” 338):

- A [Noah](#) ([Gen 6:10a](#))
 - B [Shem](#), Ham and [Japheth](#) ([Gen 6:10b](#))
 - C Ark to be built ([Gen 6:14–16](#))
 - D Flood announced ([Gen 6:17](#))
 - E Covenant with [Noah](#) ([Gen 6:18–20](#))
 - F Food in the ark ([Gen 6:21](#))
 - G Command to enter ark ([Gen 7:1–3](#))
 - H 7 days waiting for flood ([Gen 7:4–5](#))
 - I 7 days waiting for flood ([Gen 7:7–10](#))
 - J Entry to ark ([Gen 7:11–15](#))
 - K [Yahweh](#) shuts Noah in ([Gen 7:16](#))
 - L 40 days flood ([Gen 7:17a](#))
 - M Waters increase ([Gen 7:17b–18](#))
 - N Mountains covered ([Gen 7:19–20](#))
 - O 150 days waters prevail ([Gen 7:21–24](#))
 - P [God](#) remembers [Noah](#) ([Gen 8:1](#))
 - O' 150 days waters abate ([Gen 8:3](#))
 - N' Mountain tops visible ([Gen 8:4–5](#))
 - M' Waters abate ([Gen 8:5](#))
 - L' 40 days (Gen end of) ([Gen 8:6a](#))
 - K' [Noah](#) opens window of ark ([Gen 8:6b](#))
 - J' Raven and dove leave ark ([Gen 8:7–9](#))
 - I' 7 days waiting for waters to subside ([Gen 8:10–11](#))
 - H' 7 days waiting for waters to subside ([Gen 8:12–13](#))
- G' Command to leave ark ([Gen 8:15–17](#) ([Gen 22](#)))
 - F' Food outside ark ([Gen 9:1–4](#))
 - E' Covenant with all flesh ([Gen 9:8–10](#))
 - D' No flood in future ([Gen 9:11–17](#))
 - C' Ark ([Gen 9:18a](#))
 - B' [Shem](#), Ham and [Japheth](#) ([Gen 9:18b](#))
- A' [Noah](#) ([Gen 9:19](#))

This structure displays numerical symmetry in the dura-

tions of events, further illustrating its careful organization. Westermann notes, “The structure of the flood narrative is cyclic: it begins with the decision of God to destroy humankind and reaches its goal in the decision of God to preserve humankind from now on and never to destroy it again” (Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 393).

The flood narrative may also be organized according to the flow of the story, captured in seven movements (Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 116):

1. The decision to send the flood and rescue Noah (Gen 6:5–12).
2. The command to build the ark (Gen 6:13–22).
3. The command to enter the ark (Gen 7:1–5).
4. The coming of the floods (Gen 7:6–24).
5. The receding of the floods (Gen 8:1–14).
6. The command to exit the ark (Gen 8:15–19).
7. The building of the altar and the making of the covenant (Gen 8:20–9:17).

Theology

Creation and Re-creation

The flood story displays a pattern of creation and re-creation. Waltke notes seven parallel phases between God’s initial creation and the flood story (Waltke, *Genesis*, 128–9):

- Phase 1: Pre-creation (Gen 1:2; 8:1b–2)
- Phase 2: Second Day (Gen 1:6–8; 8:2b)
- Phase 3: Third Day (Gen 1:9; 8:3–5)
- Phase 4: Fifth Day (Gen 1:20–23; 8:6–12)
- Phase 5: Sixth Day (Gen 1:24–25; 8:17–19)
- Phase 6: The reappearance of the nuclear family bearing God’s image (Gen 1:26–28; 8:16, 18 and 9:6)
- Phase 7: The heavenly King grants his blessing on

humanity ([Gen 1:28](#); [9:1–6](#))

The flood reverses the initial creation, as Streett states, “The earth is returned to its watery chaos as the waters above are reunited with the waters below and cover the dry land. All life is blotted out” (Streett, “As It Was In the Days of Noah,” 37). After [God](#) destroys his original creation, [Noah](#) functions as the “second Adam who heads the new family of humanity” in the re-created earth (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 398).

[Salvation and Grace](#)

The flood story demonstrates God’s desire to rescue humanity from evil. [Noah](#) finds “[grace](#)” ([חֵן](#), *chen*) in the eyes of [God](#) ([Gen 6:8](#)). Sailhamer writes, “The narrator clearly wants us to look beyond the evidences of divine judgment that plays itself just outside the ark to see this primarily as a story of divine [grace](#) ... Those inside the ark with [Noah](#) find safety because of God’s gracious desire to save” (Sailhamer, “[Genesis](#),” 116). [God](#) demonstrates patience with humanity in spite of their evil disposition ([Gen 6:5](#))—He waited patiently as [Noah](#) preached to those around him (Waltke, *Genesis*, 117; compare [Gen 6:3](#); [2 Pet 2:5](#); compare [1 Pet 3:20](#)). Although none repent, [God](#) preserves a remnant of humanity and starts anew. This pattern of preserving a righteous remnant appears again with the [Israelites](#) through exile and with the present-day church ([Rom 11:5](#)) (Waltke, *Genesis*, 157).

God’s Covenant

The flood story illustrates God’s faithfulness to [Noah](#) and future humanity expressed through His covenant. In the midst of a great flood, [God](#) makes a “covenant” ([בְּרִית](#),

berith) with [Noah](#) ([Gen 6:18](#)), reaffirming that commitment again after the flood waters recede ([Gen 9:8–17](#)). After completion of the ark, [God](#) “remembers” ([זָכַר](#), *zakhar*) [Noah](#) ([Gen 8:1](#)) and causes a wind to blow over the earth and push back the waters. He vows never to destroy the earth with a flood again ([Gen 9:11](#)). Through this covenant with [Noah](#), “[God](#) graciously presents anew to fallen humanity the same task of exercising dominion over the terrestrial world, primarily through procreation” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 399). [God](#)’s covenant establishes a pattern for covenants with [Abraham](#), David, and the Church ([Gen 15:18; 17:2–8; 2 Sam 7:8–16](#)) (Waltke, *Genesis*, 154).

God and His Involvement in the World

The flood story portrays [God](#) as one who is intimately involved in the world and cares deeply about what happens to it. Fretheim writes, “The most basic purpose of the flood story focuses on [God](#) and [God](#)’s commitment to the world” (Fretheim, “The [God](#) of the Flood Story,” 34). He does not stand by when he sees the widespread corruption on the earth, but is deeply “grieved” ([יָתַעַצֵב](#), *yith'atstsev*) ([Gen 6:5–6b](#)). [God](#)’s grief demonstrates that He “is not removed and detached from [the] world ... While the external and more objective picture in this story is one of disastrous judgment, the internal, subjective image is that of divine grief” (Fretheim, “The [God](#) of the Flood Story,” 32–3). In the midst of His judgment, He preserves a remnant of humanity through [Noah](#) and his family ([Gen 6:8](#)). He instructs [Noah](#) to build the ark and preserve the animals, closes the door behind him and welcomes him back to the new creation at the end of the flood with a new covenant ([Gen 6:14–21; 7:1–3, 16; 8:15; 9:1–17](#)).

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