

THE HEBREW FLOOD EVEN MORE DEVASTATING THAN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION DEPICTS

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The special Hebrew words and Hebrew usages that appear in the Genesis flood account are explained. The titanic destruction and uniqueness, not adequately brought out in the English translation, appear remarkably and deliberately emphasized in the Hebrew.

I. Introduction

The English translation of the account of the Genesis flood (chapters 6-9) evidently describes a worldwide unparalleled catastrophe. The Genesis flood was capable of producing geologic changes that would otherwise require hundreds of millions of years. However, the usual English translations of the Genesis flood cannot approach the spectacular description in the Hebrew. This treatise explains the special Hebrew usages and constructions that appear in the Gen. 7-8:5 portion of the account of the Genesis flood.

The Hebrew words referred to in the order they first appear in Section II of this article are given in Table 1.

The English transliterations will be used to represent the Hebrew words in this article.

Several very special Hebrew words are used in Gen. 7 through Gen. 8:5 to describe the flood. The Genesis flood was so distinct from any other flood or catastrophe that it is given a special name in Hebrew, *mabul*. The Hebrew verb *baqa'* used to describe the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep (*t'hom*) pictures a gigantic cleavage of the crust of the earth with oceans of water exploding from these fissures in continual commotion. The rain during the flood was a *gesem*, the most violent of all rains, possibly accompanied by tornadic winds and hail. The "waters prevailed" (*gabar*) actually pictures a conflict between the flood and the land, in which the flood was victor.

The Hebrew usage is also descriptive of an unimaginable destruction. The increase of the flood waters translated by the simple "exceedingly" is described by a doubly emphatic superlative *m'od m'od*, used only one other time in the entire Old Testament. The Hebrew carpenter's term *mil'ma'lah* in Gen. 7:20 explains a source of confusion—the flood waters were not a mere 15 cubits above the land. Rather, the ark had a draft of 15 cubits as it rode upon the waters. The Hebrew description of the waters after the rain stopped pictures huge commotion of water capable of fantastic erosion and sedimentation.

The lexical references to the meanings of the Hebrew words are all from the *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* by Gesenius as translated by Tregelles.¹ The quotations from the English translation are all from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. The Hebrew text used is the *Biblia Hebraica* as edited by Rudolf Kittel.²

II. The Hebrew Word Study Flood

Mabul means "an inundation of waters, a deluge," according to Gesenius. This is a special word, because of its limited use. It occurs in only seven places in the entire Hebrew Old Testament. Six of those occurrences are in the first 10 chapters of Genesis, and the only time it appears outside of Genesis is once in Psalms where it is used to describe Noah's flood.

The seven occurrences of *mabul* in Genesis are as follows:

- 1) Gen. 6:17: "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood (*mabul*) of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die." The *mabul* was so destructive and extensive that God alone could bring it about. It was to destroy all flesh. The "I, even I" emphasizes the divine power required for such an event.
- 2) Gen. 7:6: "And Noah was six hundred years old when the flood (*mabul*) of waters was upon the earth." Gen. 7:10: "And it came to pass after seven days, that the waters of the flood (*mabul*) were upon the earth." Gen. 9:28: "And Noah lived after the flood (*mabul*) three hundred and fifty years." These three verses describe an event that happened only once during Noah's 950-year lifetime.
- 3) Gen. 7:7: "And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood (*mabul*)." The *mabul* was what Noah and his family had to enter the ark to escape.
- 4) Gen. 7:17: "And the flood (*mabul*) was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth." This was the only flood in history that lasted for 40 days of increase.
- 5) Gen. 9:11: God tells Noah, "And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood (*mabul*); neither shall there any more be a flood (*mabul*) to destroy the earth." God promised that nothing like that would ever happen again. It is part of God's solemn covenant. This verse shows that Noah's flood was not a local flood, because local floods have occurred countless times since Noah's flood.
- 6) Gen. 10:1: "Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; and unto them were sons born after the flood (*mabul*)." Gen. 10:32: "These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations; and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood (*mabul*)." This particular flood was unique in that it separated the age into antediluvian and postdiluvian eras much like our division into B.C. and A.D.
- 7) Psa. 29:10: "The Lord sitteth upon the flood (*mabul*); yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever." This Psalm is a Psalm of God's strength. The Psalm progresses to more and more powerful evidences of God's strength. It ends with the greatest demonstration of God's strength since creation, the flood. It is the only non-Genesis use of *mabul*, "flood."

Mabul is derived from the Hebrew verb *yabal*, which has the root meaning of "to flow, especially copiously and with some violence." Another Hebrew word is translated "flood" in the Old Testament. *Setep* is translated "flood," but never as a part of the Noahic flood. *Setep* refers to the usual floods as distinct from

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מַבּוּל ^{mabûl} , "deluge"	מְעַלְמָה ^{m'od} "exceedingly"	לְמַעַל ^{l'm'alah} "upwards"
יָבַל ^{yābal} , "to flow"	גָּבַר ^{gābar} "to prevail"	חָלוּד וְשׁוֹב ^{hālôk w'sûb} , "to return continually"
שֶׁטֶף ^{šēṭep} , "flood"	מִלְמַעַל ^{mil'malah} "upward"	חָלוּד וְחָסַר ^{hālôk w'hiser} , "to decrease continually"
בָּאָה ^{bāqá} , "to cleave"	מַעַל ^{ma'al} , "higher"	שׁוֹב ^{šûb} , "to return"
חַוּוֹם ^{t'hom} , "(the) deep"	מִן ^{min} , "from"	חָלַק ^{hālak} , "to go"
מַיִם ^{mayim} , "waters"	מִמַּעַל ^{mima'al} , "from above"	חָסַר ^{hāsar} , "to lessen"
מָטָר ^{māṭar} , "to rain"	חָ ^{ah} , "toward" (a suffix)	
גֶּשֶׁם ^{gešem} , "to rain with violence"	לְ ^{l'} , "to" (a prefix)	

Table 1. This shows the Hebrew words discussed in the article, with their transliterations and meanings.

Noah's flood. This general use of *setep* only emphasizes the uniqueness of *mabul* in referring specifically to the Genesis flood. *Setep* is translated "flood" in Psa. 32:6, Nah. 1:8, Dan. 9:26, and Dan. 11:22. The same word is translated by "the overflowing of waters" in Job 38:25, and by "outrageous" in Prov. 27:4.

Broken Up

The Hebrew word *baqa'* is translated "broken up" in Gen. 7:11. "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep (*t'hom*) broken up (*baqa'*) and the windows of heaven were opened." The verb *baqa'* was carefully chosen here to describe a violent cleavage. Any impression of the breaking forth of the fountains of the great deep as being some kind of a gurgling artesian well does a gross injustice to the Hebrew verb *baqa'*. Whenever *baqa'* is used, a violent cleavage is occurring. In Ecc. 10:9, *baqa'* is used to describe a man cleaving wood with an axe. In Ex. 14:16 God miraculously divides (*baqa'*) the Red Sea for Moses and the children of Israel as they left the land of Egypt. Amos 1:13 describes Israel's enemies as having ripped up (*baqa'*) Israel's pregnant women. Isa. 34:15 presents an excellent illustration of *baqa'* from nature. An egg cleaves (*baqa'*) as the infant bird breaks forth into life. In Num. 16:31, *baqa'* is translated "clave asunder." The earth split open suddenly enough and wide enough so that Korah, Korah's family,

Korah's mob, and all their houses fell into the fissure created. This was the supernatural event that ended Korah's rebellion against Moses.

Many similarities exist between this happening and Noah's flood. In both (1) a rebellion against God was in progress, (2) God's person remained faithful, (3) the rebellion ended with a splitting of the earth, (4) the cause of the splitting was supernatural, i.e., God caused it, and (5) even the same stem, the Niphal, of the same verb (*baqa'*) is used. Prov. 3:20 is a partial quote of Gen. 7:11. In Proverbs the same word is used for depths (*t'hom*) and for broken (*baqa'*) as is used in Genesis. Prov. 3:20 is the conclusion of two verses that go together. Prov. 3:19 reminds the reader that Jehovah knew what he was doing when He founded the earth. Prov. 3:20 concludes that Jehovah knew equally well what He was doing when He split (*baqa'*) the earth in Noah's day. Both events were unique, divine, and factual. One must keep in mind that Proverbs is a book of earthly truths. In Isa. 35:6 in a list of sudden and mighty miracles of God such as healing of the blind, deaf, and lame, occurs the miracle of the waters breaking forth in the desert. The event must refer to a flood, not Noah's flood, since the waters were to turn the desert into a fertile garden. A solitary gurgling brook would have no such effect on the desert. Psa. 78:15 describes the rock Moses struck in the wilderness. That rock "clave" (*baqa'*) and a river of water flowed forth. It sounds like Noah's flood in miniature. The flood

waters that burst out were *t'hom* discussed next. The words occur here together just as they do in Gen. 7:11.

The deliberate use of the Hebrew verb *baqa'* to describe the breaking-up action of the earth in the Genesis flood pictures the earth splitting open as an egg with oceans of water violently erupting from the fissures.

Fountains of the Great Deep

What is the special significance of the unusual phrase, "the fountains of the great deep (*t'hom*)" in Gen. 7:11? A more natural phrase would be the fountains of waters (*mayim*), since it seems to be waters that came forth. The difference between fountains of (*mayim*) water and fountain of (*t'hom*) the great deep is that the Hebrew word *mayim* "water" is a general word describing all kinds of H₂O, while the Hebrew word *t'hom* (fountain of) the great deep specifically means water making a noise, or water in great commotion. The shepherd of Psa. 23 leads his flock beside the still waters (*mayim*). He would not dare take the flock near the noisy, turbulent waters of the great deep (*t'hom*). Several examples illustrate the particular emphasis desired by the author who uses *t'hom*.

Psa. 42:7 describes wave after wave in the ocean in continual commotion and without cessation by the use of *t'hom* "of the great deep." This particular usage might well apply to the Genesis flood. Ex. 15:5 and 8 uses *t'hom* to describe the divinely restrained waters held back to allow Moses to lead the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea before Pharaoh. In Psa. 78:15, "the great depths" describes where the waters came from when Moses struck the rock and it clave (*baqa'*). It could also describe the condition of the water issuing forth from the rock. (See the previous section for the discussion of *baqa'*.)

Thus, the writer of Gen. 7:11 chose the specific word *t'hom* to clearly picture the flood waters as being a large quantity of water in violent commotion.

Rain

Gen. 7:12 describes the rains associated with the flood. "And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights." Two Hebrew nouns are usually translated "rain." The first word is *matar* "rain." *Matar* is a general word that can be used to describe a rain of any kind. In Ex. 9:18 *matar* describes a violent rain, in Gen. 7:4 *matar* describes the rain of the Genesis flood, and in Deu. 28:12 *matar* describes a normal light rain. If the writer of the Genesis flood account had used *matar* exclusively to describe the Genesis flood, we would not know what kind of rain was meant, because the word *matar* is too general. He didn't. He used the Hebrew noun *gesem* which denotes a violent, heavy rain, as distinct from *matar* which denotes any rain. *Gesem* is derived from the Hebrew verb *gasam* which means "to rain, especially with violence." Two verses serve as good examples of the distinctive force of *gesem*.

In I Kings 18:45, Elijah had prayed for rain to end the 3½-year drought after the destruction of the prophets of Baal. The result was a *gesem* "rain." It was such a torrent that Ahab's chariots bogged down and

Elijah on foot ran past Ahab in his chariot. In Eze. 13:11 and 13 the rain translated "overflowing shower" is not an ordinary rain, but is violent enough to destroy mortared walls. It contains stormy wind and great hailstones. This could be a clue to the nature of the Genesis flood.

The rain of the Genesis flood was not a gentle rain shower. Rather, it was such a violent rain that the specific Hebrew noun used to describe it was the noun for the most violent rain in the Hebrew language.

Exceedingly

M'od means "exceedingly." The word is fairly common in the Bible. It occurs in the books of Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, I Samuel, I and II Kings, Isaiah, Job, Psalm, Ezra, Daniel, and II Chronicles. Its only use in Genesis other than the ones to be explained is in Gen. 1:31 where God states that the entire creation is very (*m'od*) "good."

In only two instances in the entire Old Testament is the Hebrew adverb *m'od* doubled. In these two instances, it appears in the form *m'od m'od*, "exceedingly exceedingly." This doubled superlative construction is the form used to express the greatest possible emphasis. Both uses of *m'od m'od* occur in Genesis. The first instance of *m'od m'od* occurs in Gen. 7:18 and 19 to describe the flood waters.

"And the waters prevailed, and were increased greatly (*m'od m'od*) upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters. And the waters prevailed exceedingly (*m'od m'od*) upon the earth; and all the high hills that were under the whole heaven, were covered."

The translator's "greatly" and "exceedingly" in these verses are ridiculously temperate. In view of the doubled superlative construction, the maximum possible emphasis is intended here. The writer does not describe waters that increased only "greatly." Rather, he describes an unimaginable explosion of water everywhere. This unbelievable explosion and increase of water during the flood was like unto only one other event in the Old Testament.

The only other Old Testament instance in which the double construction *m'od m'od* is used is in Gen. 17:2, 6, and 20 where God makes a covenant with Abraham. God promises to multiply Abraham's children, *m'od m'od*.

That, like the one unique flood, is an unbelievable increase, because of maximum possible emphasis in the Hebrew. The increase promised by God was from no children at that time to an entire nation that could not be numbered.

The magnitude, severity, and uniqueness of the Genesis flood is described in the Hebrew with the unique usage of the maximum emphasis possible in Hebrew, the doubly emphatic superlative.

Prevail

Gabar in the Qal stem means "to be strong, to prevail." The verb is translated "prevail" everywhere it is used in the account of the Genesis flood. In the flood account it is used in Gen. 7:18, 19, 20, and 24. In each verse *gabar* is used in the Qal stem. *Gabar* in the Qal

stem is used only four other times in the entire Old Testament. Therefore, its use seems to be special. It is of interest to examine the other places that use *gabar* in the Qal stem.

In Gen. 49:26, Jacob blesses Joseph. Jacob says that his blessing prevails over (*gabar*) the blessing of his ancestors. One blessing thus covers up another blessing. This is the only use of *gabar* in Genesis other than the flood account. In Ex. 17:11, Israel was at war with Amalek. When Moses lifted his hands, Israel prevailed (*gabar*), otherwise Amalek prevailed. One force thus overcomes another force. In II Sam. 1:23, in a song of lament, David cries that Jonathan was stronger than (*gabar*) the lions. This is another use of the concept of one force overcoming another force. In Job 21:7 there is a general reference to the strength (*gabar*) of the wicked overcoming the righteous. These verses contain all of the Qal stem uses of *gabar* in the Old Testament, excluding the flood. From them one can surmise that *gabar* in the Qal means that one force overcomes another or conquers another or covers up another. What do these concepts mean when applied to the flood account that uses them?

In the Genesis flood account *gabar* of water over land pictures water completely covering up all of the land. One could say the force of the waters overcame the land, or that the waters conquered the land, or that the water covered up the land and made it null and void. The only picture consistent with the use of *gabar* in the Qal stem in the Genesis flood is a picture of a very deep, totally worldwide flood that completely overcame all land.

Upward

Gen. 7:19, 20 states: "And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered. Fifteen cubits upward (*mil'ma'lah*) did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered." These verses seem at odds with each other. Verse 19 states that all the high hills were covered by water. Verse 20 says after that even the mountains were covered by water. However, verse 20 also states that the flood waters rose only 15 cubits. A cubit is approximately one-half a yard, so that we have a very unusual situation. A worldwide flood covered all the mountains, but the flood was less than 10 yards deep. What was the writer trying to tell us in these verses?

To answer the question, we must examine the Hebrew word, *mil'ma'lah* translated "upward" in verse 20. The same Hebrew word appears a few times in books other than Genesis (Ex. 25:21; 26:13; 36:19; Josh. 3:13, and 16), but it appears only one other time in Genesis. One chapter earlier Noah was building the ark. In this location *mil'ma'lah* is associated with a numerical value just as it is in Gen. 7:20. None of the non-Genesis uses of *mil'ma'lah* are associated with numerical values, so they are of little help here. The other use of *mil'me'lah* in Genesis is in 6:16, "A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above (*mil'ma'lah*); and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories

shalt thou make it." To what technical dimensions is God referring here as he instructs Noah in the construction of the ark? What does the Hebrew word *mil'ma'lah* mean?

Mil'ma'lah is derived from the Hebrew word *ma'al*, which has an unused root meaning of "higher, the higher part." The word is found in the Hebrew Old Testament only with prefixes attached. It is found with the prefix *mi(n)* attached in the form *mima'al*. In this form it usually means "from above." It can also have the suffix *ah* which indicates direction. There is no need to supply an English word for the *ah*, only to remember that its presence indicates a direction. With an additional prefix *l'* "to" it appears in the form *l'ma'lah* translated "upwards," literally, towards upwards. The most altered form of the Hebrew word is the form having both prefixes and the directional suffix. This is the form *mil'ma'lah* "upward" that it is used in Gen. 7:20 and in Gen. 6:16. In this form the word literally means, "from the above," "from the thing that is above," or "from the top." In this light, use of the word in Gen. 6:16 makes clear sense. In Gen. 6:16, the thing that was above the window was the top of the ark. God was telling Noah to finish the window so that it was no more than one cubit from the top of the ark. This was of great importance, because the ark would probably float low in the water. The violence of the flood would produce waves high enough to sink an ark with low open windows. God told Noah to make the windows high enough so that the flood waters would not get in as the waves pounded. This interpretation of *mil'ma'lah* makes the rest of the verse make more sense, too. Since the windows would be high in the ark, the second and third floors would naturally be below the windows. That is where God told Noah to build them.

What would Gen. 7:20 mean if the amplified translation of *mil'ma'lah*, "from the top" were used instead of the brief translation "upward?" The verse would read, "Fifteen cubits from the top of the ark did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered." The conflict is resolved. The waterline of the ark, as it rode the flood waters came halfway up to the 30-cubit-tall ark. The verse further states that the flood covered the mountains. The 15-cubit dimension does not refer to the depth of the waters from the surface of the earth, but to the draft of the ark in the flood waters.

Continually

Gen. 8:3 tells us that "the waters returned from off the earth continually (*halok w'sod*); and after the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters were abated." Two verses later the Bible states, "And the waters decreased continually (*halok w'hisor*) until the tenth month: in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, were the tops of the mountains seen." The flood waters were not tranquilly seeping into the soil as these verses in English translation would seem to say. The Hebrew words translated "continually" explain the actual condition of the decreasing flood waters.

The "continually" in Gen. 8:3 is actually a translation of *two* Hebrew verbs in the infinitive absolute form. The two verbs are *sub*, which means, "to turn

about, to return," and *halak*, which means "to go." The two verbs describe a going followed by a returning. The infinitives alone are used to express *emphasis* and *duration*.³ Thus we do not get a picture of water that tranquilly seeped into the soil. Rather, the flood waters moved going and coming a vast amount. Since Noah was viewing an ocean of water, the picture given by the double-infinitive construction of these two verbs describes a motion such as the waters of Tampa Bay suddenly draining out into the Gulf of Mexico, only to return roaring back and overflowing the bay and the city moments later. The "ing" suffix is deserved. The duration interpretation of the infinitive is intended. A single coming and going of the flood waters could be properly written in the perfect tense. If the imperfect tense had been used, the reader of the Hebrew text could easily mistake the water movement as a single coming and going sequenced in with the rest of the narrative. However, the specific double-infinitive construction seems to be used to describe unmistakable continual action coming and going and coming and going, etc. The tremendous hydraulic and erosional forces would quickly change the surface of what used to be the earth thousands of feet beneath the ark. This huge force possibly continued for three months as the ark remained on top of the mountain. Then in Gen. 8:5, the day that the first mountain tops were seen was the first day that the waters decreased continually (*halok w'hisor*). It is important to note that the pair of Hebrew infinitives translated "continually" is different here from what it

was in verse 3. The construction of a pair of infinitive absolutes is the same, but the final verb of the pair has changed from "returning" (*sub*) to "lessening" (*hasar*). It seems that the flood waters continued their wave motion, but each time a bay of water would surge off into the distance, it would not return. Instead, the top of a mountain would be exposed.

The writer chose the double infinitive Hebrew construction purposely. He used it to clearly describe the magnitude and continued duration of the giant water movements during the flood. These water movements were enough to erode or deposit miles of material. The forces were enough to wrinkle the crust of the earth.

III. Conclusion

The special words and constructions that appear in the Hebrew account of the Genesis flood add special emphasis to the English translation. Once the Hebrew description is understood, the Genesis flood is unquestionably a worldwide catastrophe of unparalleled destruction, death, erosion, burial, and deposition in a very brief time.

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The Necessity of the Canopies

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