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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 5: THE FLOOD

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Genesis chapters 6-9 carefully before reading the following background information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The biblical story of the flood is one of the most striking and well-known of all the stories of Genesis and of the whole Bible. As with the stories of creation and the fall, when we look at the Genesis flood story we find the same three possible interpretations:

1) Literal – that a great flood occurred exactly as Genesis affirms and that this flood was worldwide – covering the tops of the highest mountains (Genesis 7:20) and destroying all human life except for the man Noah and his family (Genesis 6:7–13). This view does not seem to fit the geological or archaeological records as we understand them (there are no flood deposits over most of the earth’s surface), but does seem to have the support of the words of Jesus who apparently spoke of the flood as being worldwide (Luke 17:26–35). However, careful reading of Jesus’ words shows that he compared the flood that “destroyed them all” (vs. 27) with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that “destroyed them all” (vs. 29) and the time of his return when “one will be taken and the other left” (vs. 35). This seems to be the point he was making – that in all three cases the good were saved but those who were not righteous were destroyed or left. So, of itself, Luke 17:26–35 does not necessarily teach a worldwide destruction, just that all the wicked involved were destroyed. Another detail to keep in mind is that the Hebrew expression “all the earth” is sometimes used in the Bible in a purely intensive (that is, meant to emphasize) rather than extensive (meaning all-inclusive) way – as when the area of the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah is called “all the earth” (Genesis 19:28), and the famine in Egypt is said to be over “all the earth” (Genesis 41:57). There are similar reasons why expressions such as the waters covered the “high mountains” do not necessarily mean what we might assume they mean.

2) Developmental – the understanding that the biblical flood story is a summary of numerous destructive but local floods that occurred over time in the ancient Near East and especially in the area of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers of Mesopotamia. This view has the support of the fact that archaeology has discovered large flood deposits in this area that are not universal and that date to different times in history. However, many details of the Genesis story do not make sense if the flood were local – for example, why would Noah have to take all species of land animals on board a ship to save them?

3) Symbolic – the understanding that the biblical flood story may be a literary one that explains God’s judgment on large numbers of people who will not turn to him. This possibility that the flood story is a kind of literary parable may be supported by parallel stories from the ancient Near East – some of them known to have been written down many centuries before the biblical account was produced.

Three ancient Mesopotamian stories in particular make reference to a great flood, the epics of *Ziusudra* (zee-u-sud-ra), *Atrahasis* (atra-hah-sis), and *Gilgamesh* (gil-ga-mesh). In the first, Ziusudra hears the gods’ decision to destroy humanity and constructs a vessel which delivers him from the flood brought on by the gods. In the Atrahasis epic, the gods become upset that humans are making too much noise. As a result, they take various measures to destroy humans, the last of which is to bring a great flood upon the earth. The only person to survive is Atrahasis, who takes his family into a ship, closes the door behind them, and remains there until the flood subsides and the birds he sends out do not return.

Even more detailed parallels with the biblical account appear in the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which the hero meets a couple who survived the flood. The man, Utnapishtim, tells a story of the flood very similar to that of Genesis. Utnapishtim was warned by the god Enki and told to prepare a ship into which he takes every kind of animal. The flood comes from heavy rain and because the “windows of heaven” are opened. Eventually the ship comes to rest on top of a mountain (see Note 1 below) and at this point Utnapishtim sends out a dove, a swallow, and a raven – almost exactly the same species as mentioned in Genesis.

After the flood, Utnapishtim offers sacrifice and the goddess Ishtar lifts her curved jeweled necklace above her head in the shape of the rainbow’s arc as a sign of remembrance of the flood (in Mesopotamia, the rainbow was called “the jewels of heaven”). In the Mesopotamian Sumerian king list, the kings living before the flood are said to have had extremely long lifespans which shorten dramatically after the flood occurs – just as with the great ages of the pre-flood patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible.

The similarities of these and other Mesopotamian stories with the biblical account are far more than could be coincidental. However, whatever our own views are regarding the different interpretations of the flood story, once again *the exact nature of the flood is not as important as the intent of the Genesis account to communicate a message about God and his relationship with humanity.*



“And the waters were upon the earth” Image: Michael Rosskothén

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

When we consider the Genesis flood story, the first thing we must realize is that the account is one of *uncreation*. The world which was first created out of a primeval watery chaos (Genesis 1:2) is now returned to the watery chaos out of which it came. For example, while Genesis 1:6-9 describes the separation of the waters above the earth from the earth, and the separation of the lower waters and the earth, these acts of creation are repeated – in reverse order – in the uncreation described in the flood story (Genesis 7:11).

There is a reason for this underlying structure of the biblical story. The reversal of creation is accomplished because God removes the restraints placed on the natural world – just as Genesis chapter 6 shows us that humans had cast off all moral, ethical, and religious restraints. In other words, the story is constructed to show that the punishment fit the crimes of sinful humanity.

In fact, this perspective on the flood is specifically stated by the biblical text which uses forms of exactly the same Hebrew verb, *hihsit* “to destroy,” to describe both man’s destruction of the created realm in Genesis 6:11 (often translated along the lines of “Now the earth was *corrupt* in God’s sight”) and God’s resulting destruction of mankind in Genesis 6:13 (often translated “Behold, I will *destroy* them with the earth”).

What God announced he would destroy was essentially the out of control destruction by humans – the punishment could not fit the crime more closely. This fact must be stressed because in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel there was no such concept – legal punishments were usually dependent on things such as the social class of the person/s affected by the crime.

When we turn from the theme of the flood story to the way in which it is presented in Genesis, we find some remarkable aspects to the narrative. The flood story is clearly very carefully constructed in terms of its literary structure. The story is told in two equal halves – the flood’s rising (Genesis 7:17-24) and falling (Genesis 8:6-12), with the events of each half of the story being mirrored in the other half. For example, in the first half of the story Noah is said to be the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 5:32) and this fact is repeated in the second half (Genesis 9:18).

In the same way, God makes a covenant with Noah in the first half of the account (Genesis 6:18) and in the second half (Genesis 9:8). The flood waters rise for 150 days (Genesis 7:24) and fall for 150 days (Genesis 8:3). Noah waited seven days in the Ark for the flood to begin (Genesis 7:10), and he waited seven days in the ark to send out a bird (Genesis 8:10), and so on. A dozen or so elements of the story are repeated or reflected in the story’s two halves in this way.

The clear mirroring of the story’s two halves goes far beyond the possibility of coincidence and shows that, contrary to the documentary hypothesis approach (see Unit 2) which sees the story as being a fusion of different accounts, the Genesis flood narrative represents a carefully constructed single story.

The events said to have occurred at the end of the flood in Genesis 8 also mirror the creation events of Genesis 1 and 2 – in effect painting a picture of *re-creation* after the “uncreation” of the flood. Just as the Spirit (literally “wind”) from God was said to be over the earth and waters on the first day of the original creation (Genesis 1:2), so God sent a wind over the earth and waters after the flood (Genesis 8:1), etc. The following table lays out the similarities of the second half of the flood story (after the rains) with each of the seven days of the original creation:

CREATION ACCOUNT	EVENT	FLOOD ACCOUNT
1:2	A wind from God moves over the earth and waters	8:1
1:6-7	The waters are moved to make an area of habitation	8:1-5
1:9-12	The dry ground and plant life appear	8:5-12
1:14-19	Light appears (Noah opens the Ark to the light and sees the world)	8:13
1:20-23	Animals and birds appear	8:15-19
1:24-31	Humans appear, God blesses them and says “be fruitful and multiply”	8:18-9:7
2:1-3	A sign given regarding God’s cessation of activity	9:8-17

Table showing correspondences between the creation story of Genesis 1-2 and the re-creation of Genesis 8-9.

Notice that the similarities between the key events of creation and post-flood re-creation are not general, but are highly specific and follow *exactly* the same order. When we put all this information together, it is clear how carefully crafted the biblical flood story is – with the first half of the account describing the un-creation of the world and the second half describing the world’s re-creation.

This symmetrical literary structure of the flood narrative not only argues against the documentary hypothesis view of the story, but also ties into the overall literary structure of the early Genesis stories. Each narrative section of the book of Genesis begins (or ends) with the Hebrew term *toledot* which literally means “bringing forth” (Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; etc.) and emphasizes the progressive nature of an ongoing story of creation rather than a patchwork of similar accounts.

We tend to think of the end of the flood account as the story’s happy ending – the rainbow and the repopulation of the earth – but Genesis 9:20 tells us that “Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.” Scholars have pointed to possible issues that may be reflected in this verse. Why would Noah immediately plant a vineyard as opposed to more basic crops? Why did righteous Noah become drunk but no one else? These details almost seem to suggest what we would call a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder situation. If this was intended in the account, it is an extremely discerning one far advanced beyond its ancient parallels.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

Despite the similarity of the Mesopotamian and biblical stories of the flood at many points, the *theology* of the Genesis account is vastly different from that of the older stories. For example, while other stories concerned themselves only with the fate of their own nations or peoples, the biblical story shows God is concerned with the whole world – possibly a reason for the “worldwide” nature of the Genesis flood story. There are many other important differences regarding God and the pagan gods. While in the Atrahasis epic the gods become upset that humans are making too much noise, the Genesis story tells us that God only brought about the great flood because of the increase in human wickedness.

It is interesting that the wickedness described in Genesis 6 is not viewed from the perspective of religion – as a matter of idolatry or other religious sins against God – but purely as a matter of moral misdeeds aimed at humans – with the violence that had begun with Cain and Lamech (Genesis 4) and had escalated to worldwide proportions. The Genesis account conveys that once this kind of evil had become widespread enough, from God’s perspective there was no longer any purpose to human existence.

In the myths of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the flood is characterized as simply an extreme example of the most common natural catastrophe of which they were aware, and the real interest for the ancient hearer of the story is the luck or perhaps resourcefulness of those who survive. In the Hebrew flood story, on the other hand, the uniqueness of the scale of the flood is paralleled by the scale of wickedness portrayed. This makes it all the more striking that the biblical flood story also differs from other early parallels by stressing God's sorrow at having to punish his created children (Genesis 6:6). While other stories speak of the anger of the gods against humanity, there is no hint of their sorrow.

Critics of the Bible often speak of the "vengeful" nature of a God who would bring a flood on the world. But the biblical flood story makes it clear that God warned humans through Noah, "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), over a long period of time (Genesis 6:3), before exacting the punishment he had threatened. Only if the story had said God brought the flood without warning could God's action be said to have been a vengeful one. Rather than showing a harsh, vengeful God, the flood account emphasizes the patience, love, and mercy of God as much as his justice and righteousness.

The Genesis flood story also ends in a very different theological way from earlier stories. After the flood humans continue in their wicked ways, but God has bound himself to utilize an alternative solution to this problem (Genesis 9:12-16) – a covenant that displays his love and desire to help humanity and one that is remarkable in that it is binding only one way – on himself – not to destroy humanity. Ultimately, the Genesis flood story is about the salvation of those who walk with God as much as it is about the punishment of the wicked. In the New Testament, the apostle Peter uses the story as an analogy of baptism (1 Peter 3:18-22); although what he explains is a New Testament concept, the analogy stresses the aspect of salvation (vs. 20) that forms an underlying basis of the Genesis story.

*Note 1: Sensational claims are sometimes made regarding the finding of remains of Noah's ark, but we are not entirely sure which mountain the biblical "Ararat" is intended to represent (the Bible mentions the mountain range rather than a specific mountain), though searchers have concentrated on the peak called Agri Dagh (17,000 feet) in what is now eastern Turkey. Fragments of ancient wood from this area claimed to be from the ark have been carbon-14 dated and shown to be no older than the fifth century A.D. As Christians, we should be wary of embracing or spreading unfounded stories supposedly "proving" the Biblical flood, and it is doubtless better to concentrate instead on the message of the story – that God is both just and merciful.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: What are the two halves of the flood story and what does each half stress?

Name three ways that the biblical story of the flood differs theologically from older parallel stories.

Briefly summarize the way the Genesis 1-3 creation story is reversed in Genesis 6-9, showing that the flood story is likely a carefully constructed single literary unit.

Looking Below the Surface: Nothing is recorded of Noah's words until after the whole flood story is completed. What – instead of his words – does the flood account stress about Noah?

Everyday Applications: In what ways can we apply in our lives what Peter says about the flood story being an analogy of salvation (1 Peter 3:20–21)?