Noah's Flood, or God's? *Why the Biblical Narrative Is a Major Challenge*

BY BRIAN BULL AND FRITZ GUY

Few parts of the Bible are more widely and seriously misunderstood than the narrative of the Great Flood (Gen. 5:32–9:17). To begin with, it is almost always regarded as a story about Noah[1]; indeed, the event is regularly called "Noah's Flood." But this designation reflects a literary mistake and a theological blunder. From the beginning to the end of the entire narrative the primary figure is *God*, who does most of the acting and all of the talking; Noah mostly (and properly) does what he is told to do, but he does not utter a single word.

So the Biblical narrative of the Flood demands and deserves intellectual effort on the part of 21st-century readers—and not just because of the various scientific and practical questions that inevitably arise:

- Did it actually happen?
- Was it really worldwide?
- How could all the animals and birds fit into the ark?
- How could kangaroos get there from Australia?
- How were the problems of food and sanitation solved?

Far more important than these questions is the overarching theological challenge: If we believe that the character of God—revealed definitively in Jesus the Messiah—is unconditional, universal, and unending love, how are we to understand a picture of God committing the greatest genocide in human history?

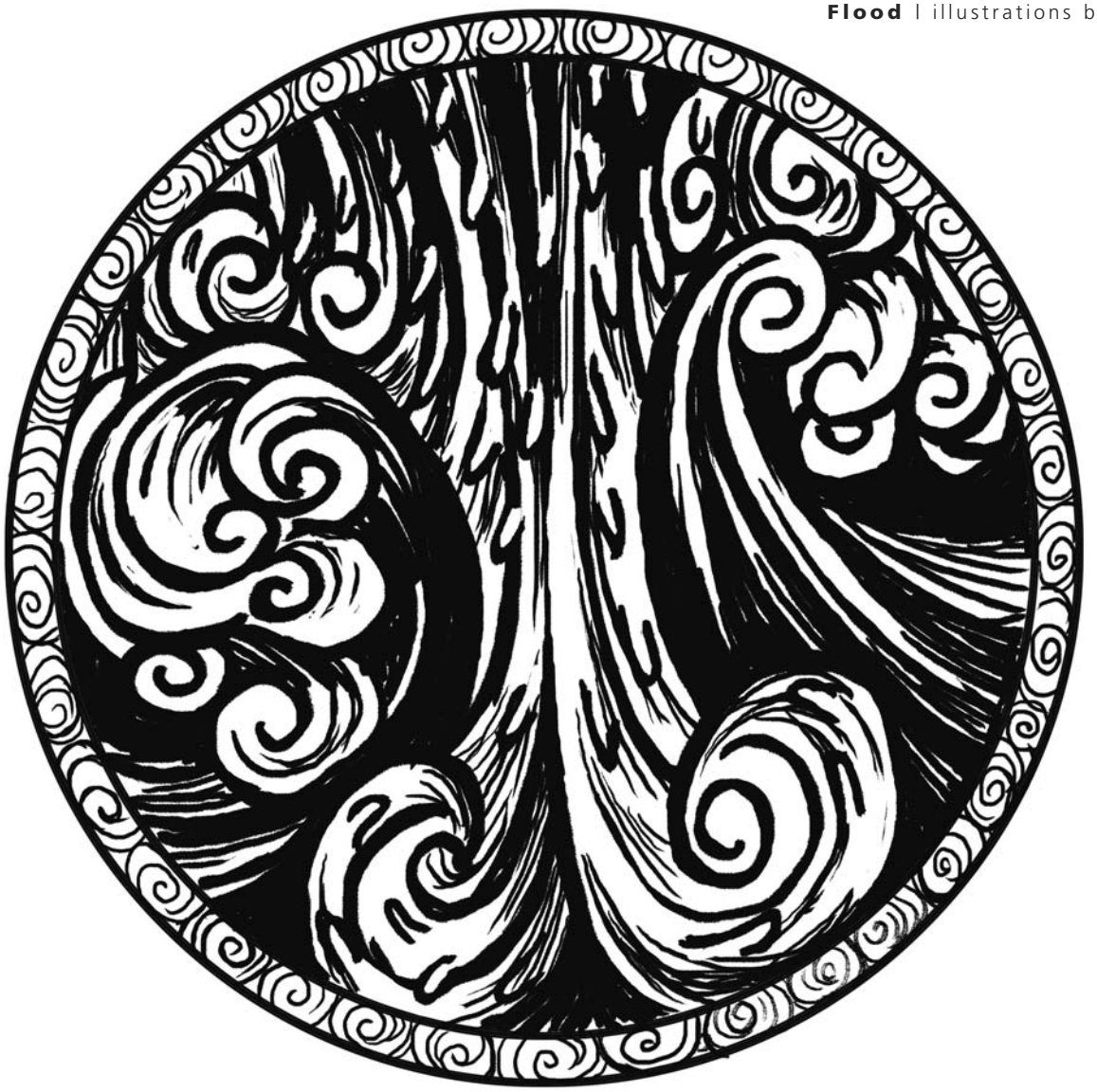
One could try to make the problem go away by simply denying that God's love is truly universal. This was the view of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who regarded humanity as a *massa damnata* (literally, a "damned mass") that deserved its ultimate fate in hell, but out of which God chose to save some. Since in this scenario no one actually deserved to be saved, no one was treated unfairly and no one could justly complain.

Fortunately there is a better way to address the theological question about the Flood—a way that involves a twofold strategy. First, it recognizes a profound difference between the world picture of the ancient Hebrews (the people who composed, heard, recorded, and transmitted the Biblical narrative) and ours—a difference that is generally overlooked because of the changing meaning (and consequent misunderstanding) of the English word *earth* and its corresponding terms in other modern languages. The Hebrew *'erets*, usually translated "land" later in the Old Testament, is unfortunately still translated "earth" (in 82 of 85 occurrences) in most modern English versions of Genesis 1–11. This is the case even though the most common meaning of the word *earth* today is a planetary sphere circling the sun—a meaning it could not have had when it was first used in Genesis 1–11. For any clarification of the extent of a flood of "Biblical proportions," the English word *land*, meaning surrounding territory, is much truer to the original Hebrew meaning.

Second, and even more important, the better way to address the theological challenge of the Biblical narrative of the Flood recognizes the decisive difference between the conceptual awareness with which the original audience heard the narrative then and the awareness with which we hear the narrative now. An explication of this second issue is the principal concern of this essay, which leads to the conclusion that the Flood narrative is not primarily a story about divine punishment but a story about divine rescue.

"Explanacepts" are the key

A distinguishing characteristic of humanness is our fundamental need to explain things—first to ourselves (as "understanding") and then to others (as "explanation"). We want explanations for every thing that exists and every event that happens. These understandings and explanations have two objectives: we want to know the *processes* by which things come to be what they are and by which events occur; and



There has never been a time or culture in which a significant section of reality was left without any explanation.

we also want to know the *purposes* of things and events. In other words, we want to know both causes and meanings. So we have the intellectual projects of science and theology.

Not so obvious but just as important is the fact that the tools we use in the process of explaining are *concepts*—more precisely, *explanatory concepts*—with which we understand and explain why there is something rather than nothing, how that "something" functions, and what it all means. In this essay, for reasons of linguistic convenience and verbal economy, we refer to explanatory concepts as *explanacepts*. These are the tools with which we think, and because they function "behind the scenes" as presuppositions, it is difficult (and very unusual) to step back and think about them.

But in order to understand the Biblical description of God's activity in relation to the Flood, we must think about how we think—and about how the original author(s) and audience thought, for in that audience were the ones who first comprehended, recorded, and preserved the narrative we read now. As we explore the relation of the Flood narrative to the ancient Hebrew understanding of reality, we need to deal with explanacepts—both theirs and ours. This, unfortunately, is not only an unusual activity; it is also a very difficult one.

An explanacept, a concept that enables us to account for some part or aspect of reality, functions in conjunction with our other explana-

cepts; and this set of explanacepts functions as a whole to explain all the reality we know. Because explanacepts emerge and develop over time, the way modern readers hear the Flood narrative is inevitably very different from the way the ancient Hebrews heard it.

To clarify this difference, we can try to think (temporarily) with only the explanacepts available to the Hebrew slaves as they fled from Egypt. Judging from the account of their journey in Exodus and Numbers, they had in their mental toolkit two explanacepts with which they understood everything they experienced. For them, every event, situation, or thing was the result of action by either *humans*[2] or *God*. If one was not responsible, the other was; it was as simple as that. There was no concept of *nature* as something other than humans or God. While it is certainly true that in the Flood narrative God was described as using what we regard as elements of nature—rain (Gen. 7:4, 12; 8:2), "the fountains of the great deep . . . and the windows of the heavens" (7:11; 8:2), and "wind" (8:1), God was understood as directly determining what, when, and how everything happened.

As the migrating Hebrew slaves journeyed through the wilderness, one evening "quails came up and covered the camp" (Exod. 16:13).[3] This occurred after the migrants had complained about their lack of food in the desert, and Moses and Aaron had told them that the LORD had heard their complaints and would soon send them both meat and bread (16:2–12). In the Biblical narrative there is no reference to *nature;* instead, *God* acted, and the Hebrews had food. Then, several weeks later,

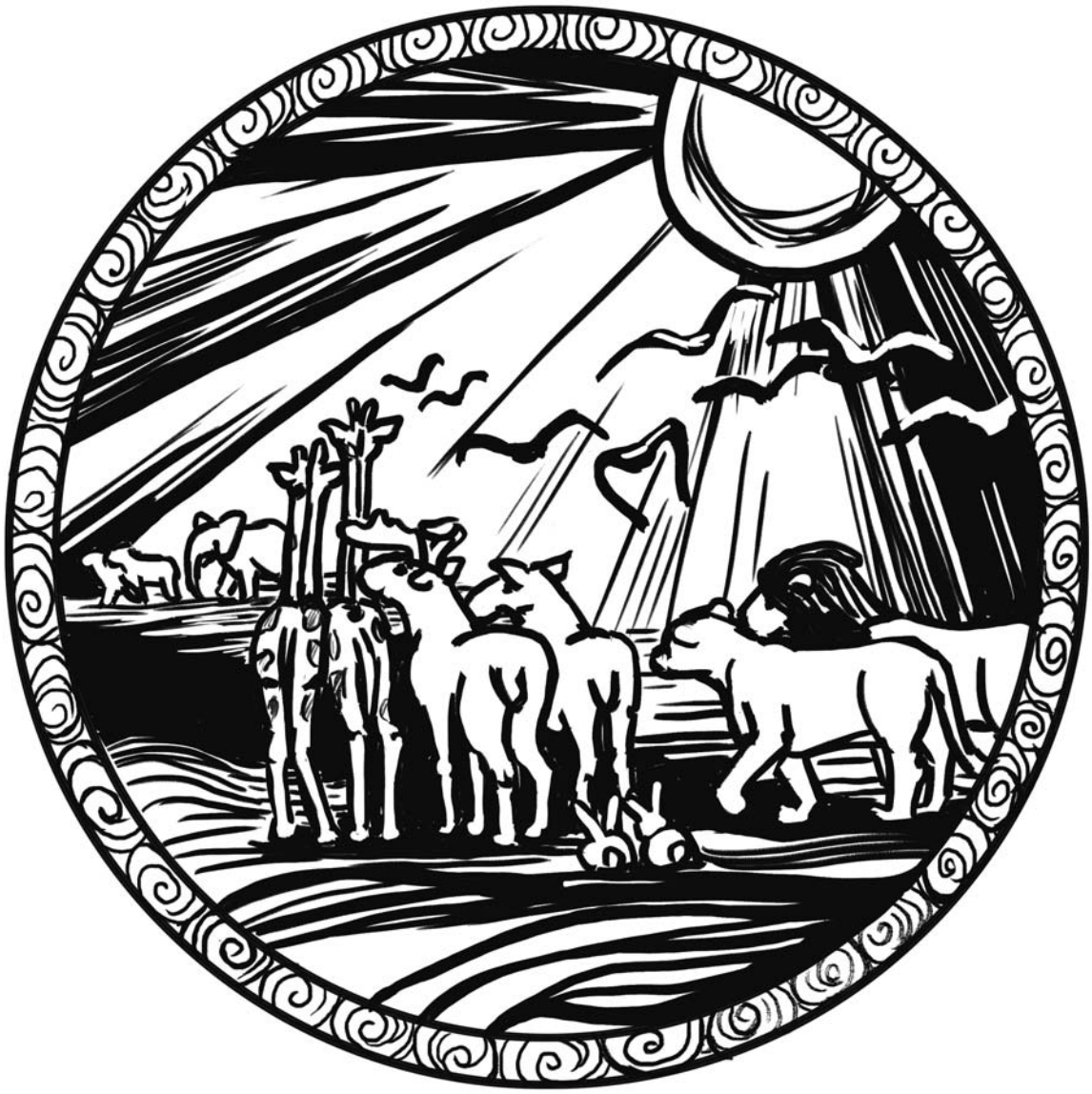
> *a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp. . . . The people worked all that day and night and all the next day gathering the quails. . . . But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague (Num. 11:31–33).*

In this account the LORD again got credit for the quails, but this time there was a problem. A God who answered prayer for food by sending in quail meat was very much in tune with the idea of a providential God that was developing in the Hebrew consciousness. It fit in well with their growing understanding of "what God does." However, the idea of a God who sent quails a second time but arbitrarily rendered the meat lethally toxic did not fit at all. The Hebrews had only one way out of the dilemma. They processed the event according to the only other explanacept they had—*humans*—and interpreted it as the result of some of their number having an unbridled craving for quail meat. Although craving food was something they had experienced a few weeks earlier and often experienced later, with just two explanacepts they could only conclude that the visitation of death was the result of something that *humans* had done that caused *God* in turn to make poisonous the meat that previously had been safe to eat.

By contrast, if we were in a modern group traveling through a desert and some members of the group suddenly died after eating quail meat—something they had often eaten before—we would immediately wonder why it had suddenly become lethal. We would not think of attributing the toxicity to God; instead we would check Wikipedia or the relevant scientific literature. In the scientific literature we would discover that in the autumn, flocks of European migratory quails cross the Mediterranean en route to their winter home in sub-Saharan Africa, and that a portion of a flock sometimes stops for several days to feed in a group of Greek islands, of which the best known is Lesbos. If the quails happen to stop in mid-September, they may gorge themselves on the ripe seeds of a plant known as red hemp-nettle,[4] which contains an alkaloid that is harmless to avian muscle but highly toxic to mammalian muscle. In humans, the alkaloid causes the muscle cells to dissolve and discharge their contents (myoglobin) into the bloodstream. If myoglobin is present in the blood in large enough amounts, it plugs the kidney tubules; and if kidney dialysis is not available, the result is almost always fatal.

Quails still migrate in the fall of the year and are still sometimes toxic to people who kill and eat them.[5] Now, however, most of the people along the route know to avoid eating quail meat at the critical time in autumn; and for those unlucky ones who do kill and eat toxic quails, life-saving dialysis is available at a nearby hospital.

Our very different modern assessment of a very similar ancient event diverges drastically from the original Hebrew assessment because our mental toolkit contains an additional explanacept, *nature*, accounting for events that are not caused directly by either *God* or *humans*. This third explanacept, furthermore, has two subcategories—*natural law* (explaining events that are predictable), and



God did not always rely on the passage of time for the development of theological understanding.

chance or *randomness* (explaining events that aren't). Similarly, for modern theistic believers the explanacept *God* also has two subcategories, *preservation* (explaining the continuation and regularity of nature), and *miracle* (explaining events that are unusual, unexplainable by natural law, and spiritually significant). Or, in simpler terms, *preservation* is God's regular activity; *miracle* is God's extraordinary activity.[6]

The Biblical narrative of the Flood comes from a time at least as early as the stories of the nutritious and toxic quails. If the mental toolkit of the Hebrews then contained only the explanacepts *humans* and *God*, it is surely appropriate—even necessary—for us to understand the Flood narrative in terms of the same two explanacepts.

We need to recognize, however, that at the time the Flood narrative was composed and originally heard, perhaps around 1,300 BCE, the explanacept *God* included actions of angels, who in Biblical narratives are always portrayed as agents of *God*. So we might call this explanacept *suprahuman*. Similarly, the action of *humans* included the actions of non-human animals. But for convenience and simplicity we continue to refer to the two ancient Hebrew explanacepts as *God* and *humans*, giving these terms slightly broader content than is common practice.

Unless we try to think (temporarily) without our explanacept *nature*, we will not hear the

Flood narrative as it was originally intended to be heard as the Word—but not the "words"—of God.[7] This original articulation and understanding of the ancient Hebrew narratives is where their authenticity and authority reside, and this is where we must begin in order to understand properly what God is communicating to *us* by first communicating to *them*.

A story of what God does

We have considered the challenge that our modern explanacept *nature* and our sub-category *miracle* create for us in reading ancient Hebrew narratives. We regularly think with these concepts, and we can hardly think at all without them. The original author and audience, of course, could not think *with* these concepts, because they didn't exist.

At the very beginning of the narrative, however, the situation seems to be reversed, as we encounter language that does not make sense to us:

> *When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. . . . The sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown (Gen. 6:1, 2, 4b).*

Thomas Prince distinguished between the "first cause" of the earthquakes—God's judgment—and the "second cause"—natural law.

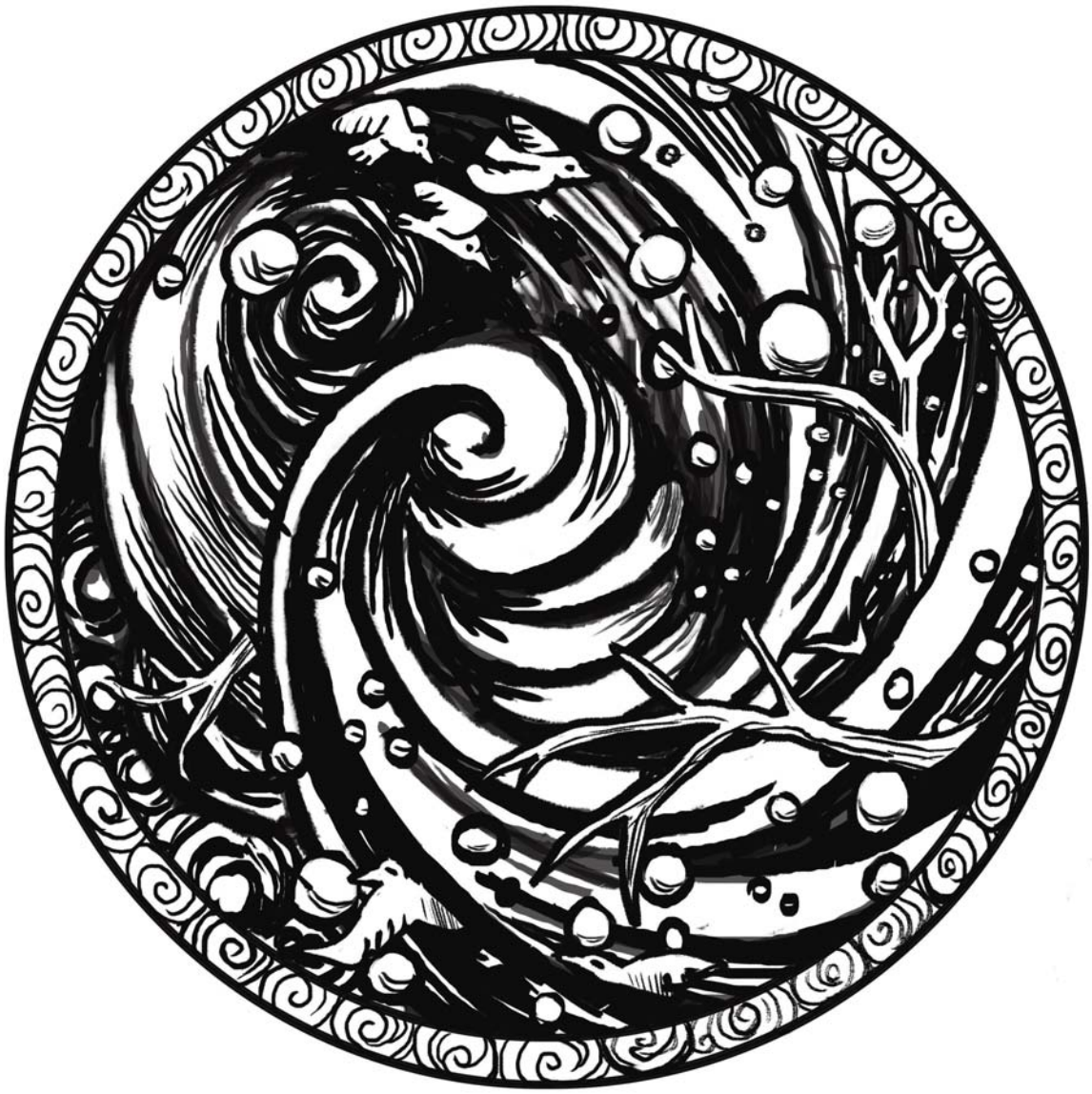
To us this reference to misbehaving "sons of God" does not explain anything at all, because we cannot place them in our mental landscape. Our explanacept *nature* does not allow for celestial beings to mate with human women and produce offspring, and our sub-category *miracle* is excluded by the requirement that such an event be appropriate to the character of *God*. As a result, we have no satisfactory way of understanding this particular Biblical text, so we usually ignore it.[8]

The point at issue here is the identity of the "sons of God," for which three principal alternatives have been proposed—all with Biblical and traditional support. The earliest interpretation we have (although still about a thousand years later than the original account) holds that the "sons of God" are heavenly beings who "defied God by moving out of their appointed realm and marrying (molesting?) human 'daughters.' In this interpretation *'elohim* is taken as a proper noun ('God') or as a genitive of attribute (indicating quality), where it refers to a class of beings, giving the sense of 'divine beings.' "[9] This view is the oldest of the three, appearing by the second century BCE, and it is supported by the expression "the sons of God" referring to heavenly beings in Job 1:6 and 2:1 (NKJV), as well as the fact that it is the interpretation chronologically closest to the original narrative.

Another, much later interpretation, advocated by Augustine (354–430), Luther (1483–1546), and Calvin (1509–64), holds that the expression "sons of God" refers to godly humans—namely, the descendants of Seth in contrast to the descendants of Cain. This view is supported by Old Testament references to the Israelites as the "children" [literally "sons"] of God" (as in Deut. 14:1; 32:5, 6; Psalm 73:15). Proponents of this view sometimes hold that the phrase "daughters of men" refers to Cainite women and the sin of intermarriage, or to women in general and the sin of promiscuity. In either case, the assertion "the sons of God saw that they were fair" and "took wives for themselves" is strikingly similar to the earlier description of Eve's response on encountering the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:6).

A third view, proposed by some Jewish interpreters, holds that "the sons of God" were human judges or rulers. Indeed, the word *'elohim* sometimes did have a broader meaning than "God"; it could refer to humans in authority, particularly those who administered justice (Ps. 82). Relevant to our present concern with the meaning of "the sons of God" is the address, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you" (82:6). Like the other interpretations, this one has both Biblical and traditional support.

In considering this puzzling text, we must



Everything that exists or happens must be accounted for by the available explanacepts.

not forget that the account was originally heard and understood by minds equipped with only two explanacepts, *God* and *humans*, with which to understand everything that existed or happened. Clearly the catastrophe of the Flood was not caused by any known *humans*, so it had to have been caused by *God*. But that resulted in a picture of a deity without foresight, who regretted creating the earth's inhabitants in the first place (Gen. 6:6, 7). Such a deity might have been acceptable to the Hebrews' pagan neighbors, and to later Greeks and Romans, but it did not fit into the Hebrews' own explanacept *God*, which entailed ethical, providential monotheism. To address their dilemma, the Hebrews had to utilize their only other explanacept, *humans*, in one way or another. Thus they achieved with their available mental explanatory tools the best picture of God possible at that time and place.

So our interpretative task is complicated. First we have to determine (as best we can) the original ancient Hebrew understanding of the event according to *their* explanacepts and their theology. Then we have to determine (again, as best we can) the actuality of the narrated event according to our explanacepts and the available archaeological and geological evidence. Finally, we have to determine (as best we can) the *meaning*—the theological significance—of the event. (The repeated "as

best we can" with every step in the process acknowledges that our scenario is never more than probable and warrants intellectual humility.)

A non-natural catastrophe occurring in nature?

Near the beginning of the description of the Flood itself, God said, "Every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground" (Gen. 7:4b); and with the Flood at its height the narrative declared that God "blotted out every living that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air" (7:23). Unless we carefully note this affirmation and its reiteration, we may understand this event as a catastrophe in the realm of *nature*, and probably say that this extraordinary *natural* event had a *supernatural* cause, failing to notice that this is not (and could not have been) what the narrative said to its original hearers. Bookended by *God's* pronouncement that He would "blot out," and the confirmation that *God* had indeed "blotted out every living thing," the scenario between these statements was not understood as a catastrophe of *nature*. It was, from start to finish, an act of *God*.

The Flood could not have been understood as a *natural* catastrophe with a supernatural cause because the explanacept *nature* had not yet come into human consciousness. So, even though the LORD took full responsibility for sending the Flood, our modern concept of *supernatural* causation is of no use whatever in understanding the Biblical text as it was originally composed and understood. Indeed, the idea of supernatural causation is misleading, for it draws our minds down a pathway of interpretation that did not exist until many hundreds of years later. The Great Flood was understood as the direct action of *God*, for that was the only explanacept then available that could effectively deal with an event of such magnitude.

Genesis 7:11b might seem to refer to *natural* factors in the narrative: "All the fountains of the great deep [*tehom*] burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened." But, given the "bookends" of the passage, both "the fountains of the great deep" and "the windows of heaven," while obviously not part of the reality of God, were most probably understood as tools used by *God* rather than independent causal agents.

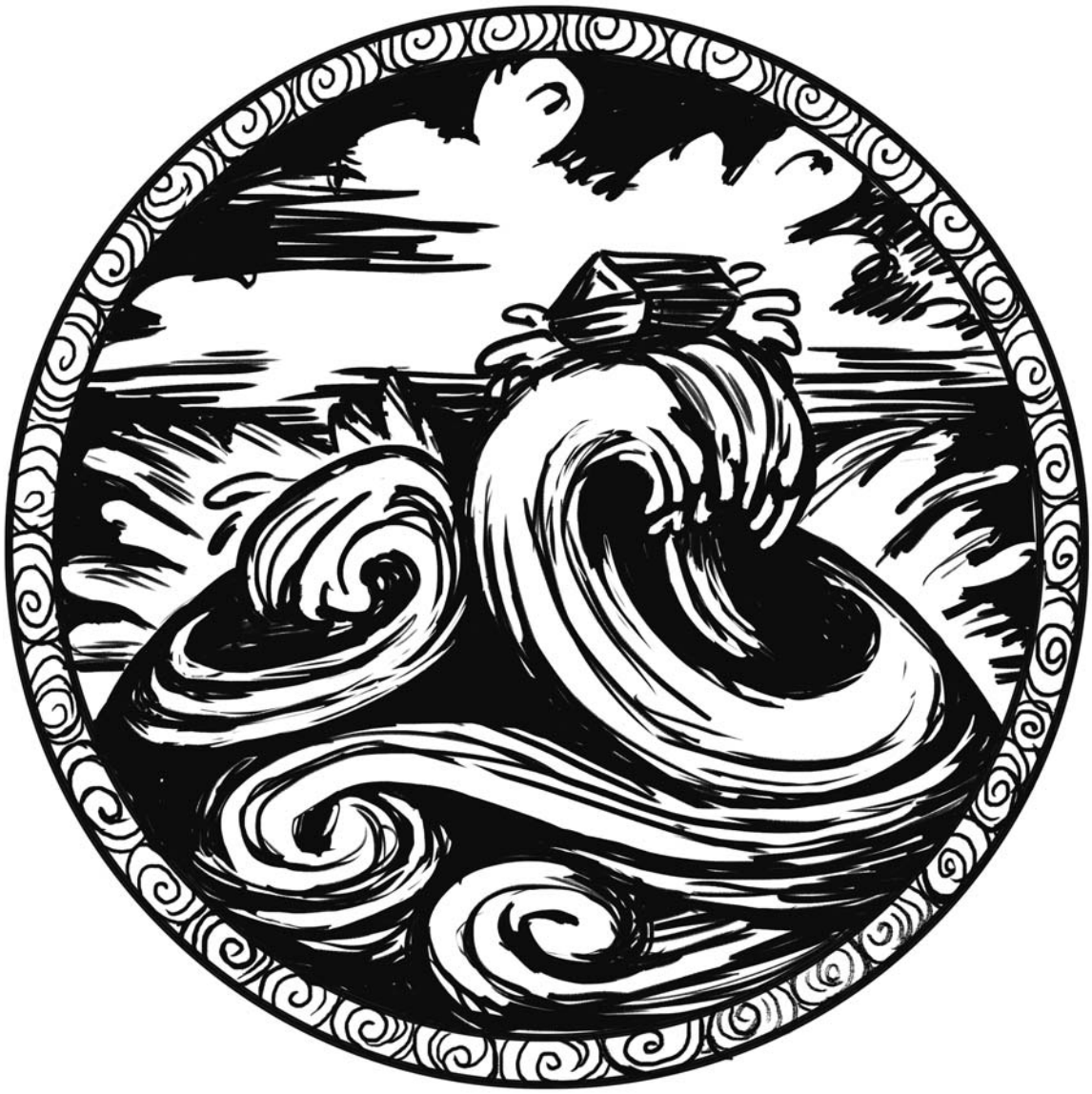
The catastrophe that God brought about was, however, neither the end nor the main point of the narrative. Indeed, when the water was at its height and the disaster was at its worst, "God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark" (Gen. 8:1). This is the decisive moment, the high point in the narrative: "But God remembered Noah." Here, however, the Hebrew conjunction *wᵉ*, is better translated "and" than "but," in accord with the fact that the narrative is most of all a story of divine rescue, not punishment. The end of the story reaffirms this fact with God's covenant promise that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (9:15).

A developing understanding of what God does

In the narrative of *God's* flood we have a glimpse into the process by which the content of the Old Testament came to be. At its inception the process involved an understanding of God creating a world in which humans could thrive, but which became so disrupted by human sin that God blotted out everything alive. As the process continued, a diverse nation of farmers, visionaries, scholars and leaders developed, under divine guidance, an increasingly adequate understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us—a clearer understanding of what the explanacept *God* actually meant.

Developing by fits and starts, the understanding of *God* grew clearer and richer as time passed, preparing the Israelites for the Christ event—in which God took the form of humanity to give the world its best picture of the values, motivations, and goals of the God who notices the fall of a single sparrow (Matt. 10:29; Luke 12:6). The Judeo-Christian Scriptures are in large part a record of this long and tortuous process.

An example of one stage in the process was documented in the Old Testament book of Proverbs in the time of the Hebrew monarchy: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD's alone" (16:33). God was understood to control the outcome of the casting of lots—"rolling dice" in our terminology. In the 21st century we can understand the words, but their meaning is literally incredible. In order to make any sense of this assertion, we have to remember that the concept of *chance* or *randomness* is relatively modern. For the ancient Hebrews, on the other hand, since the way the lots landed was obviously beyond the control of *humans*, the only reasonable explanation was that *God* did it: "the decision is the LORD'S alone." This understanding of what God does persisted for centuries; when the disciples of Jesus wanted divine guidance in choosing a replacement



When the disciples wanted divine guidance in choosing a replacement, they prayed and "cast lots."

for Judas Iscariot, they prayed and "cast lots . . . and the lot fell on Matthias" (Acts 1:26).

Biblical incidents like these suggest two insights into the process by which the understanding of God developed and matured.

First, in every human mind the explanacept set is bounded; that is, everything that exists or happens must be accounted for by the available explanacepts. There are no loose ends. When the set consisted of only two explanacepts, *humans* and *God*, an event that could not be explained by the first defaulted to the second. Despite the fact that our explanacepts now include *nature*, it is still the case that everything that exists or happens is understood or explained by one of them—as an action of *humans*, *God*, or *nature*—or by some combination of them. Since the explanacept *nature* includes the categories of both *natural law* and *chance* or *randomness*, it can, in principle, explain absolutely everything—without the need to invoke *God*. This is the ideology of "scientism."

Of course, it is often the case that we do not know the precise means leading to a particular event; but we can designate the general category into which it fits. Today we confidently understand earthquakes by the explanacept *nature*, attributing most of them to the movement of the earth's tectonic plates against each other as they float on the viscous magma between the plates and the earth's core. We are reasonably confident that the magma is

kept liquid because of the heat released by radioactivity. All this is clearly the activity of *nature*.

In 1727 and 1755, moderate earthquakes rocked Boston and nearby regions of New England, resulting in many sermons in local churches. Most preachers attributed the tremors to God's wrath and left the matter there. A sermon by Thomas Prince (1687–1758), however, distinguished between the "first cause" of the earthquakes—God's judgment—and the "second cause"—natural law. The natural cause Prince favored was vapors expanding in caverns deep underground and thus disturbing the earth's surface.[10] Here, as in the Flood accounts, was a moment in explanacept development that was captured in a written document. In this case earthquakes were caught (in 1755) in the process of being transferred from the explanacept *God* to the explanacept *nature*.

Second, as an explanacept changes, it affects the other explanacepts in the bounded set. Separating earthquakes from the explanacept *God* could not occur until the explanacept *nature* had arisen and developed enough to take over "earthquake responsibility." For this reason, simply assigning a difference in the understanding of *God* to a "different culture" and/or "different time" seriously understates the magnitude of the differences between the ancient Hebrews and us. New Englanders of Prince's time could accept a tentative proposal that earthquakes might not be simply be an expression of God's wrath precisely because other intellectual aspects of the late 17th and early 18th centuries had made it possible to understand the idea of "first" (ultimate) and "second" (natural) causes. A few decades earlier, this attribution of meaning to these terms was not possible.

As the explanacept *God* developed through the Biblical and post-Biblical centuries, it off-loaded some of its functions to the developing explanacept *nature*. Processes like this take time; and a gracious God allowed the ancient Hebrews and early Christians plenty of it. It is clear from the record, however, that God did not always rely on the passage of time for the development of theological understanding. God often accelerated the process by inspiring individuals (we call them "prophets") and having them pass on their insights. This too is part of the Biblical record.

A final question involving the Flood accounts can now be answered: Why are the Flood accounts a part of the Bible if what they document is a very early and incomplete stage of theological understanding—a less-than-optimal theology? The answer is that the explanacept *God* could develop only as rapidly as the development of the explanacept *nature* allowed. *Human, theological*, and *natural* explanations have all changed and developed over time, but there has never been a time or culture in which a significant section of reality was left without any explanation. This is true today: everything that exists or happens is explained by the causal activity of *humans*, *God*, or *nature*. At the time when the Flood narrative originated, and later even to the time of Jesus, everything that existed or happened (including the casting of lots) was understood to be caused by either *humans* or *God*.

The refinement of the explanacept *God* could only occur when the rest of the explanacept set was understood well enough to allow for development in the understanding of who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us. An indication of the need for this development is evident in the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood, which is one step on the way to a better understanding of God. The message of the narrative is that God's ultimate aim is not to punish for sin but to rescue from destruction. ■

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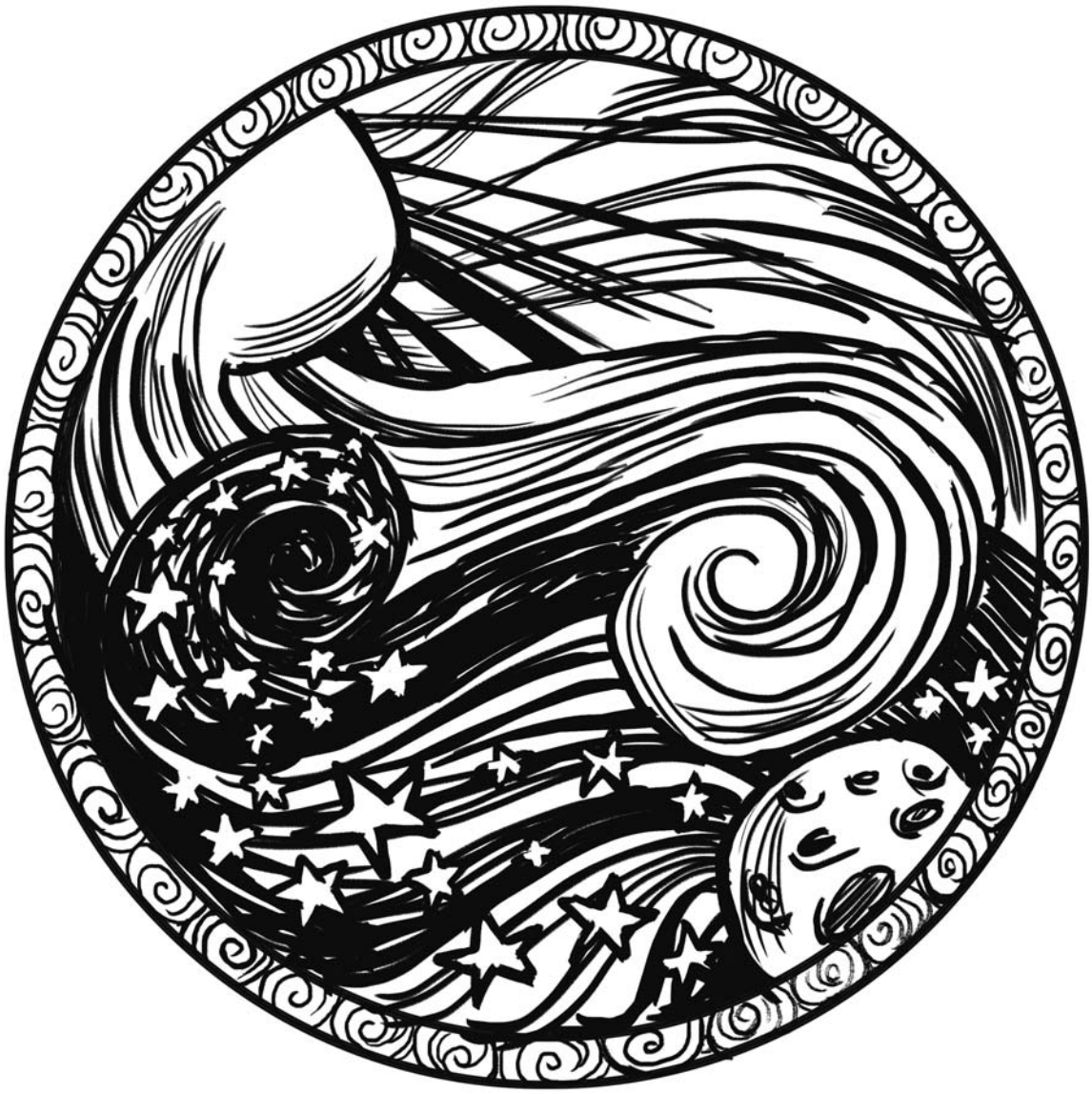
This article is from a forthcoming book on the Biblical flood.

References

1. A recent example is the epic movie *Noah* (Paramount, 2014).

2. The word *man* in its generic anthropological sense (compare the Greek *anthropos*) would be stylistically preferable were it not for the sexist baggage it has acquired.

3. Biblical quotations in this article are from the New Revised Stan-



This is the decisive moment, the high point in the narrative: "But God remembered Noah."

dard Version (NRSV).

4. "Red hemp-nettle" is the common name; the scientific name is *Galeopsis ladanum*.

5. A. G. Billis, S. Kathanakis, H. Giamarellou, G. K. Daikos, "Acute Renal Failure after a Meal of Quail," *The Lancet*, Sept. 25, 1971, 702.

6. Contrary to the insistence of David Hume (1711–1776) and many others since, a *miracle* is not a "violation of natural law," but instead, analogous to the exercise of human will, the introduction of additional causal factors into the natural order.

7. See Ellen G. White, Manuscript 24, 1886, in *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:20, 21: "The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. . . . The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. . . . The Bible was given for practical purposes. . . . The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . . God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen."

8. Some readers of Scripture seem to think that ignoring difficult issues of interpretation is more respectful of the sacred text than investing time and effort in struggling to understand the text. This reasoning is, of course, fallacious.

9. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 325.

10. R. M. Hazen, ed., *North American Geology: Early Writings*, Benchmark Papers in Geology, 51 (Stroudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchingon, and Ross, 1979), 10.