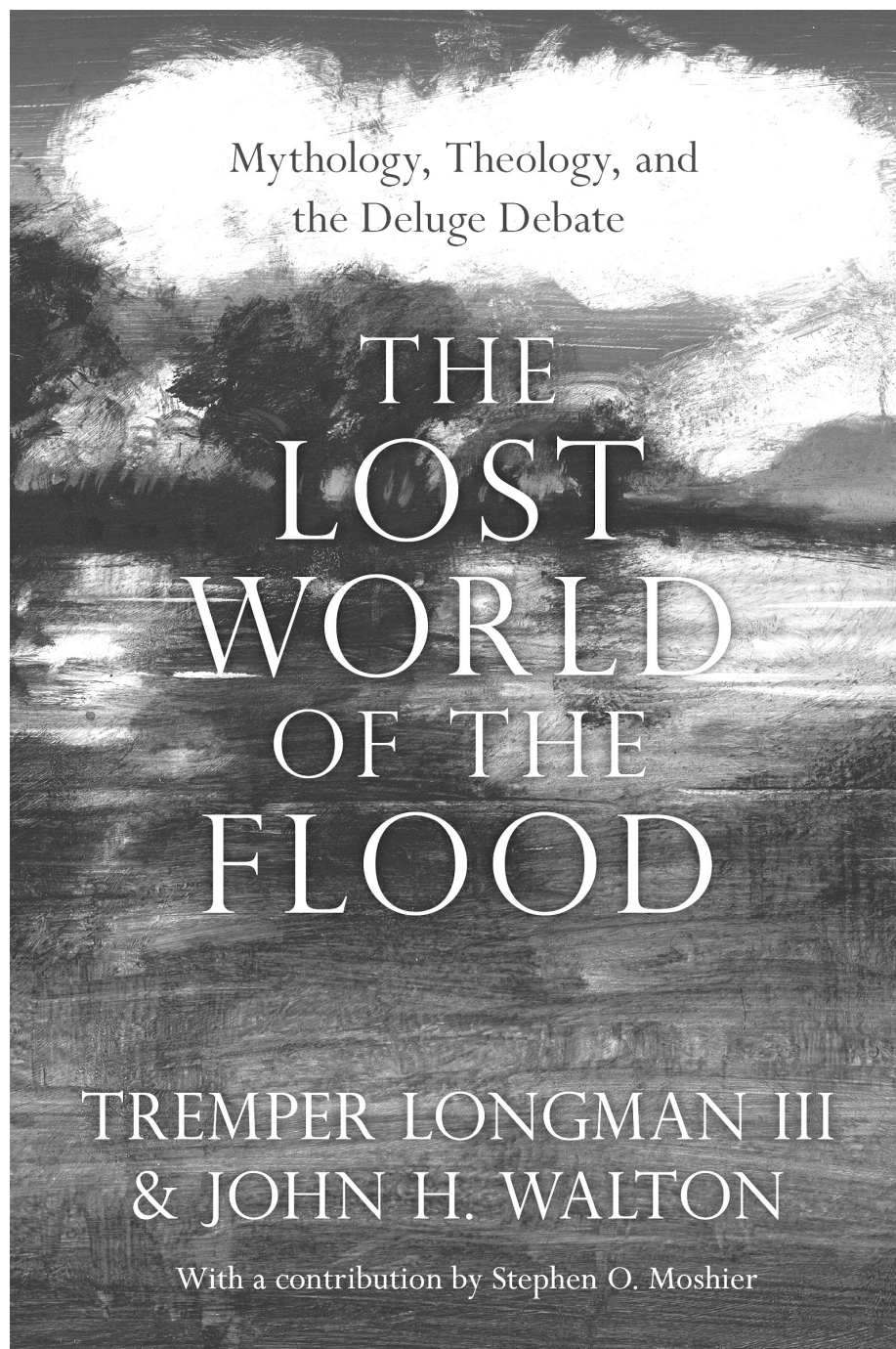


Bible



T. Longman and J. H. Walton. *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic. 2018

THE LOST WORLD *of the* FLOOD

Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate

A BOOK REVIEW

BY BRYAN NESS

The Lost World of the Flood is an attempt by Longman and Walton to read and interpret the biblical account of the Noachian flood in a way that respects the Bible as inspired, while being true to evidence from the natural world as revealed by modern science. They view the theological messages of the Bible as inerrant, and that the description of events themselves using figurative language and other literary devices, such as hyperbole, do not detract from biblical inerrancy. They contend that one of the great faults of the traditional, literalist interpretation of Genesis 1–11 is to misread the text by not reading from inside the “cultural river” in which the text was written. The original readers of the flood narrative would have had lots of insider knowledge and understanding that many modern readers would lack. A great mistake for modern readers is to read modern cultural ideas and scientific understanding into the text, thus imposing interpretations never intended by the writer.

Recognizing differences between what the authors call the metaphorical ancient and empirical modern “cultural rivers” is key to their approach to reading these texts. The ancient cultural river contains such currents as “community identity, the comprehensive and ubiquitous control of the gods, the role of kingship, divination, the centrality of the temple, the mediatory role of images, and the reality of the spirit world and magic,” whereas our modern cultural river has currents such as “rights, freedom, capitalism, democracy, individualism, globalism, market economy, scientific naturalism, an expanding universe, empiricism, and natural laws.” These differences inevitably lead ancient and modern readers to interpret these texts very differently.

One striking way that ancient and modern readers differ is in their conception of history. Modern readers expect history to reflect objective facts, whereas an ancient reader has no such expectation. More important to ancient readers than objective fact is the meaning of

the story, which they hold as paramount. Longman and Walton make this point by imagining a spectrum from metaphysical to empirical. To a modern reader, for an historical account to be “true” it must be 100 percent empirically based, the more metaphysical in nature the evidence, the more likely it is not history, but rather myth. Ancient readers had no such concern about parsing a story, which is judged more for its meaning than for its empirical accuracy. Even an extremely metaphysically based story, if it teaches an important truth, is fully accepted as “true.”

With this in mind, the authors spend much of the book reconstructing the meaning of the flood story (and surrounding stories, such as the Tower of Babel) as ancient authors were attempting to convey it. To accomplish this, they also include an analysis and comparison of contemporaneous flood stories from the surrounding cultures in Mesopotamia. As anyone who is familiar with them knows, these other flood stories are very similar in some respects, but very different in other ways. The most notable difference is that all the other flood stories are rooted in polytheism, and that the gods brought the flood upon mankind because they were unhappy with humans for some poorly articulated reason, and that through various kinds of trickery involving dissenting gods, some humans were warned and were saved from dying in the flood. After the flood, the gods were glad that all mankind had not been destroyed, because the gods belatedly realized how dependent they were on humans for their own survival. This interpretation of the flood is referred to as the great symbiosis. The gods originally created mankind to work for them, and in return the gods did favors for humans.

The Noachian story of the flood, where the event is caused by a single, all powerful god, stands in stark contrast. God created humans so he could have a relationship with them, not so he would have slaves to serve him. After creating order out of chaos at the creation of the world, God also invited humans to cooperate with him in continuing to order his creation. In this scenario, the flood was either a punishment from God for human sin and rebellion (the more traditional interpretation), or the flood is a recreation event to restore order to a world that had become increasingly disordered, also partly the fault of humans. Either of these two interpretations (or both together) is seen by the authors as consistent with the

theological message of the author of the Genesis flood account, and whether or not the flood was literally worldwide, these truths would remain true.

The authors also carefully analyze the language and literary devices used in the telling of the flood story. In spite of the colorful ways the story is often retold, reading directly from the text, Noah comes across as a flat character, with no dialogue recorded between him and God or anyone else, giving the story that much more of a metaphysic/mythological feel. Again, whether Noah is an actual historical figure or not is not an issue for the author of the story, but he is assumed to be a real person (and Longman and Walton believe the account is based on a real historical figure, as well) for the purposes of story and its meaning.

One of the longstanding controversies surrounding the flood story has been its scope. Was it a worldwide event or just a very large local or regional event? Given a complete lack of modern geologic evidence for a worldwide flood covering the highest mountains, many modern theologians have attempted to reinterpret the biblical account as a local event by assuming that the Hebrew word *‘erets*, which has traditionally been translated as “earth,” should rather be translated as “land.” By making this substitution, it is argued that it makes clearer the original author’s intent, i.e., that they are describing a very large flood that covered *their* entire “land.” The problem with this approach is that internal evidence suggests that the original author is describing the flood as universal, and that he appears to mean the whole earth when the word *‘erets* is used. Other modern theologians acknowledge this, and take a different tack, suggesting that the original author simply believed that the flood covered the entire earth, even though it actually covered only their region of the world.

Longman and Walton take a subtly different approach. They acknowledge that the Genesis account is describing a real, historical event. They also acknowledge that the author is intentionally using universal language in describing the flood. Where they depart is in their interpretation of why the author describes it in universal language. Describing the flood as universal is a hyperbolic device to emphasize the cosmic importance of the event, that it is the basis for God’s first covenant with His people, the promise after the flood to never again destroy the earth

in this manner. The Genesis author doesn't care whether the flood covered the whole earth or not (and may not even have known one way or the other), but that does not prevent his use of hyperbole to make his point about God and His universal purpose in sending the flood.

Some readers might balk at the idea that Bible writers would use hyperbole in this fashion, but Longman and Walton give many other clear-cut examples where hyperbole is used, such as the descriptions in Joshua 1–12 of Joshua and his soldiers conquering the entire land of Canaan and killing *all* of the enemy inhabitants. This is clearly hyperbole, since in Joshua 13 these supposedly dead enemies once again require conquering. Hyperbole is also evident in many aspects of the flood story itself. The size and description of the ark are simply too outlandish to be taken literally, as never in history has such a large wooden boat been constructed, and those that even approach the size of the ark were not very seaworthy. The rapidity with which the flood waters are described as rising and evaporating also defy scientific explanation. Longman and Walton see these, and other examples of hyperbole, as literary devices to buttress the importance of the theological truths being taught by the story. They believe that ancient readers would have likely been well aware that such a large ark and such rapid flooding were not realistic but did not let that get in the way of a well-told story whose theological teachings are so integral to their nation's history.

On an interesting side note, I did not realize until reading this book that there was any question that the ark was built of wood. I was always taught that Noah used "gopher wood" to build the ark, never realizing that the Hebrew word for the ark used in this story is the word

tebah, which also describes the small reed "basket" that kept baby Moses afloat in the Nile. The word *gopher* occurs only here in the Old Testament, so its meaning is uncertain, and was just assumed to be some type of wood. *Gopher* is followed by the word *qinnim*, which can be translated as rooms, but may be more appropriately translated as "reeds." Thus, the ark may have been made from reeds rather than wood, further making its size unrealistic.

If the flood was a real event, is there any evidence

for it? Longman and Walton do contend that the flood was a real event, but that we may never be able to identify the specific event from geologic evidence. A strong contender does exist and is well described in the book *Noah's Flood* by Ryan and Pitman, but Longman and Walton believe that it is not important that the exact event be identified. The fact that several Mesopotamian accounts of a similar kind of flood event occurred should represent ample evidence it did occur.

To dispel all rumor that a literal worldwide flood ever happened, the authors include a chapter written by Stephen O. Moshier, who is currently a professor of geology at Wheaton College in the department of Geology

and Environmental Science, a good choice on their part for a chapter that digs deeply into geological data. Moshier confronts five common claims by creationist geologists, showing that each of them has no factual basis from geology: 1) seashell fossils in rocks above sea level, 2) rock layers over entire continents, 3) rapid deposition of sand carried across continents, 4) layers made in rapid succession, and 5) no slow and gradual erosion. His critiques of these and other flood geology assumptions are based on standard, robust geological concepts which are not up for debate in scientific circles. His estimates of how fast

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the flood waters would have had to rise and fall (100 feet per day), although astounding, would not be enough to move the amounts of sediment required to account for the many sedimentary formations found around the world.

The authors end the book with a plea for recognition that truth may be found in both science (nature) and Scripture, God's two great books, and that it is problematic to pit Scripture against science. They affirm that the Bible is inerrant in the truths it intends to teach, the truths that are essential to salvation, but that the Bible is clearly not intending to teach science, which is the role of God's second book of nature. Scripture is fully sufficient and clear when it comes to matters of salvation but may be more difficult to interpret in areas where its contents overlap science and nature.

Longman and Walton see science and the Bible as partners, each informing and challenging the other. Findings from science may prompt a need to reexamine particular interpretations of Scripture, and Scripture should challenge science when science tries to claim that it is the sole arbiter of all truth. It is when theologians step out of their area of expertise and claim that clear scientific conclusions must be false, even in the face of overwhelming physical evidence, that trouble begins. Although science cannot be considered the final arbiter of *all* truth, truths concerning physical reality are in its purview, and theologians end up a laughingstock when they do not carefully consider those cases where science has a strong case. It should be emphasized here, that science in these cases is not negating the Bible, just our interpretation of the Bible; the Bible remains an inerrant guide to theological truth, according to Longman and Walton. The authors quote the well-known comments of St. Augustine on this very topic, and I think his thoughts are powerful and relevant enough to close with the famous quote in full:

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian,

presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion (I Tim 1:7).

Endnotes

1. W. Ryan and W. Pitman, *Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries about the Event That Changed History* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
2. St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Volume 1, Books 1-6*, trans. by J. H. Taylor (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 42-43.



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