

The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON XXXVII : GENESIS 7: 17-24 – THE MABBÛL: THE DEVASTATION WROUGHT BY THE MABBÛL

“Here the drama reaches its climax with the destruction of creation by the waters. Alliteration and repetition combine to describe a scene of watery chaos from which all life has disappeared beneath the waves. The absence of any personal names, apart from a parenthetical mention of Noah in v 23, enhances the atmosphere of desolation. The effects of the rising waters are portrayed by focusing on different aspects in turn. The ark floats (17-18), then the high mountains are covered (19-20), and all living creatures die (21-23). A brief cut to the ark again in 23b reminds the viewer that there is still a glimmer of hope, but the sequence closes with a final shot of the waters triumphing over the earth (24).” [Wenham, 1:182]

“The paragraph closes with an awe-inspiring picture of the mighty waters covering the entire earth. We see water everywhere, as though the world had reverted to its primeval state at the dawn of Creation, when the waters of the deep submerged everything. Nothing remained of the teeming life that had burst forth upon the earth. Only a tiny point appears on the face of the terrible waters: the ark that preserves between its planks the seeds of life for the future. But it is a mere atom and is almost lost in the endless expanse of water that was spread over the face of the whole earth. A melancholy scene that is liable to fill the reader with despair. What will happen to this atom of life?” [Cassuto, 2:97]

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE — Along with my usual references, this and the following Flood lessons will be using much material from ‘*Grappling with the Chronology of the Genesis Flood*,’ Steven W. Boyd & Andrew A. Snelling, editors; Master Books, Green Forest AR; first printing 2014; sixth printing 2022. The translation used in these next few studies will be from this resource.

Episode 2, Scene 5: Genesis 7:17-20; **Theme:** *The flooding of the earth for forty days and nights and the great power of the water over the surface of the whole earth to a minimum depth of fifteen cubits.*

¹⁷ And the Mabbûl was upon the earth for forty days. And the waters increased and lifted up the ark, and it rose up from upon the earth. ¹⁸ And the waters were powerful, and they increased greatly upon the earth. And the ark went upon the surface of the waters. ¹⁹ The waters were exceedingly powerful upon the earth. All the high mountains which were under all the heavens were covered. ²⁰ Fifteen cubits higher the waters were powerful and the mountains were covered.

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation:

***v. 17 – And the flood continued / forty days / upon the earth,
and the waters increased, / and bore up the ark, / and it was lifted up above the earth.***

***v. 18 – The waters prevailed / and increased greatly / upon the earth;
and the ark floated / on the face of the waters.***

***v. 19 – And the waters / prevailed so mightily / upon the earth
that all the high mountains / under the whole heaven / were covered.***

***v. 20 – Fifteen cubits / upward
did the waters prevail, / and the mountains were covered.***

THE INTENTIONAL USE OF VERBAL PARALLELS — “The brief description in v. 12 is protracted in vv. 17-20 by means of structural overlay and numerous repetitions so as to give the literary effect of increasingly rising waters. ‘The tautologies of the account ... portray the fearful monotony of the unbounded expanse of waters.’ [Delitzsch] ‘Waters’ (5x), ‘increased’ (2x), ‘rose’ (3x), and ‘greatly’ (3x in Heb.) dominate the short span of forty-seven Hebrew words (vv. 17-20) to underscore the sense of the escalating waters. Exemplary of this highlighting is vv. 18-19, where in v. 18 the adverb ‘greatly’ is followed in v. 19 by its occurrence twice, ‘very greatly’ (*mē’ōdh mē’ōdh* ; The NASB has captured the repetition by ‘prevailed more and more upon the earth.’). Verse 17 corresponds to v. 12 in structure and content, with the parallel descriptions ‘rain’ and ‘flood.’ The former features the downpouring rains while ‘flood’ in v. 17 concerns the accumulating waters they produce. The language of our passage, including vv. 21-24, backtracks to 6:1-8, which tells of humanity’s increasing sin and God’s response to destroy the earth: ‘increased’ (*rāvhāh* , vv. 17-18) is reminiscent of how ‘great’ (*rabbāh*) man’s wickedness is (6:5); ‘rose’ (*gāvhar* , vv. 18, 20, 24), rendered ‘prevailed’ (AV, NASB), echoes its noun derivative ‘heroes’ or ‘strong ones’ (*gibbōrīm* ; 6:4); and ‘wiped out’ (*māchāh* ; v. 23) repeats the first condemnation in 6:7. The inclusive language, ‘all,’ ‘every’ and ‘everything’ (*kōl*), imitates the universality and pervasiveness of humanity’s wickedness (6:5). ***By this linkage the narrative shows the causal relationship between the sin of humanity and the consequent flood that came upon the perverse world.***” [Mathews, 1:379f]

Rabbi Cassuto notes the symmetrical structure is particularly apparent in vv. 17-24. The key words ‘flood, waters’ with ‘[upon, above, from] the earth’ are repeated throughout the paragraph, ***depicting the dominion of the waters of the Mabbûl upon the earth during a hundred and fifty days.*** Note in vv. 17, 18, 19, 24 the word ‘waters’ or its synonym ‘flood’ occurs six times as the subject, coming immediately after the initial word in the Hebrew. The phrase ‘[upon, above, from] the earth’ is found eight times (Cassuto says seven) in our paragraph, each time forming the end of the sentence (as Rabbi Cassuto divides up the verses as shown below), ‘like an oft-repeated echo heard when one pauses in speaking.’ [Cassuto, 2:93]

- v. 17 – And the **flood** continued / forty days / **upon the earth**,
and the **waters** increased, / and bore up the ark, / and it was lifted up **above the earth**.
- v. 18 – The **waters** prevailed / and increased greatly / **upon the earth**;
and the ark floated / on the face of the **waters**.
- v. 19 – And the **waters** / prevailed so mightily / **upon the earth**
that all the high mountains / under the whole heaven / were covered.
- v. 20 – Fifteen cubits / upward
did the **waters** prevail, / and the mountains were covered.
- v. 21 – And there expired / all flesh / that moved **upon the earth**,
flying creatures and cattle and beasts / and all swarming creatures / that swarm **upon the earth**,
and every man;
- v. 22 – all that had the breath of the spirit of life / in its nostrils,
— whatsoever was on the dry land — / died.
- v. 23 – He blotted out / every living thing / that was on the face of the ground,

*man and animals and creeping things / and flying creatures of the air;
they were blotted out / from the earth.*

Only Noah was left, / and those that were with him / in the ark.

*v. 24 – And the waters prevailed / upon the earth
a hundred and fifty days.*

v. 17 – *And the Mabbûl was upon the earth for forty days. And the waters increased and lifted up the ark, and it rose up from upon the earth.* — Here the first stage of heavy rainfall is said to have lasted forty days, during which time the *Mabbûl* is fully developed and the ark is lifted and set in motion. The advance of the flood is measured by reference to the ark: it is lifted up and driven on, moving even over the high hills with the height of the waters measured in relation to the height of the (then existing) hills (v. 20).

v. 18 – *The waters prevailed and increased greatly upon the earth; (Cassuto) – And the waters were powerful, and they increased greatly upon the earth. (Boyd & Snelling)* — See lesson 36 for details concerning the word translated ‘prevailed, were powerful.’

THE LORD PROTECTS NOAH — *“In spite of the savagery of the storm, the ark neither sinks nor capsizes. Keep in mind also that Noah, unlike Utnapishtim and Atrahasis, does not have navigational personnel aboard with him.... Nor is there any explicit reference to navigational apparatus on the ark.... Noah has obeyed explicitly. If Noah is to emerge alive from the ark, it will be because of the grace and protecting presence of Yahweh – divine mercy rather than human skill will be the determining factor.”* [Hamilton, 1:296]

And the ark went upon the surface of the waters. — *“The narrative unfolds by gradations. Not only did the waters increase, as the previous verse states, but the waters ‘prevailed and increased greatly;’ not only was the ark lifted off the ground, but it floated on the face of the waters, moving away from its original position.”* [Cassuto, 2:94]

v. 19 – *The waters were exceedingly powerful upon the earth.* — Yet another ‘triumph, victory’ by the waters over the earth. Not only did the waters ‘prevail and increase greatly’ (Hebrew, *m^eô’dh*) but they prevailed ‘so mightily’ (Hebrew, *m^eô’dh m^eô’dh*, literally, ‘greatly greatly’) “The term translated ‘exceedingly’ is actually a repetition of the Hebrew adverb meaning ‘very’ – literally, the waters are ‘very, very strong.’ *Used in such a way, the adverb acts as a superlative and it highlights the intensification of the flood.*” [Currid, 1:201]

All the high mountains which were under all the heavens were covered. — The waters rose to such an extent that even the then-existing highest mountains were covered with water. “Now, as I mentioned, the water didn’t rise above today’s mountains, as they have been formed as a result of tectonic activity during the Flood. The water arose above the mountains of the pre-Flood world, which was a very different world to the one today. As stated earlier, originally there would have been one continent which was divided up into the continents we have today because of the geologic processes of this catastrophic Flood.” [Ham, 193f]

THE PSALMIST’S COMMENTARY — “Many scholars believe Psalm 104 is relating aspects of what happened as a result of the Flood: ‘*You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.*’ (Psalm

104:6-9 ESV) Because verse 9 states that the water would not again cover the earth, scholars believe this section has to be a reference to the Flood, as God promised in Genesis 9:15 there would never be such a global flood again. *Now note as we read this section from Psalm 104 that it states, ‘the mountains rose, the valleys sank.’ This seems to indicate mountain building was a result of the Flood. So the suggestion is that as the waters started to go down, mountains and valleys that didn’t exist in the pre-Flood world started to form. This means fossil-bearing layers of sediment were being raised up, explaining why we find marine fossils on the top of mountains like the Himalayas, for example.*” [Ham, 198]

all – A GLOBAL FLOOD — Hebrew, *kōl* . “This key word, translated ‘all, entire, every, and everything’ (7:19 [2x], 21 [3x], 22 [2x], 23) denotes the all-encompassing devastation and death inflicted by the Flood.” [Waltke, 140] “The inclusive language ‘all’ / ‘every’ occurs eight times (in Hebrew) in vv. 19-23, leaving no doubt about the all-encompassing nature of the destructive floods and the death left behind. There can be no dispute that the narrative depicts the flood in the language of a universal deluge (‘entire heavens’), even the ‘high mountains’ are ‘covered’ (2x; vv. 19-20).” [Mathews, 1:380]

v. 20 – Fifteen cubits higher the waters were powerful — The mountains were covered by at least 15 cubits (assuming the Hebrew long cubit, 25.5 feet or almost 8 meters) of water, allowing the ark to float over them. Apparently the story assumes the ark’s draft was half its height of thirty cubits.

and the mountains were covered. — “At first sight it would appear that there is an unnecessary repetition here of what had already been stated in v. 19: ‘all the high mountains . . . were covered,’ etc. But this is not so. The verb ‘covered’ here is still connected with the adverbial phrase fifteen cubits upward. In v. 19 we are informed in general terms that the mountains were covered; but here we are told to what extent they were covered.” [Cassuto, 2:94f] “However, I don’t believe the Himalayas, for example, were covered by 25 feet of water, as I don’t believe our modern-day mountains existed at that time, as discussed earlier. The mountains weren’t as high before the Flood.” [Ham, 191]

Episode 2, Scene 6: Genesis 7:21-24; **Theme:** *The destruction of all flesh (land-dwelling and flying creatures) with the exception of Noah and those with him, and the powerfulness of the Floodwaters for the duration of one hundred fifty days.*

²¹ And all flesh that crept on the earth perished: flying creatures and beasts and wild animals, and all the swarming things that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. ²² All in whose nostrils was a breath of the spirit of life, from all that were on dry land, died. ²³ And it wiped out everything alive that was on the face of the ground, from mankind to beasts, to creeping things, and to flying creatures of the skies. They were wiped out from the earth. Only Noah remained, and those that were with him in the ark. ²⁴ And the waters were powerful upon the earth for one hundred fifty days.

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation:

v. 21 – And there expired / all flesh / that moved upon the earth, flying creatures and cattle and beasts / and all swarming creatures / that swarm upon the earth, and every man;

v. 22 – all that had the breath of the spirit of life / in its nostrils,

— *whatsoever was on the dry land* — / *died*.

v. 23 – *He blotted out / every living thing / that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things / and flying creatures of the air; they were blotted out / from the earth.*

Only Noah was left, / and those that were with him / in the ark.

v. 24 – *And the waters prevailed / upon the earth a hundred and fifty days.*

v. 21 – *And all flesh that crept on the earth perished: flying creatures and beasts and wild animals, and all the swarming things that swarm on the earth, and all mankind.* — In vv. 21-23, Moses lingers over the destruction of life by the flood. “*All flesh ... expired ... the breath of the spirit of life*’ fulfills 6:17 and contrasts with 7:15. But as usual, at this point in the story the phraseology is much more detailed. The dying creatures are listed in the order of creation, and therefore the list ends with a mention of man.” [Wenham, 1:183] “God had already told Noah of his intention to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, existing under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall expire (6:17). Here and in the following verse, in conformity with epic style, it is related in similar, and partly in identical, language that this announcement was fulfilled.” [Cassuto, 2:95]

v. 22 – *All in whose nostrils was a breath of the spirit of life, from all that were on dry land, died.* — “The detailed description is now followed by a comprehensive statement, as though to sum up, in a single, broad portrayal, all the terrible consequences of the Deluge. Every species of creature into whose nostrils, at the time of the creation of the world, the Lord had breathed the breath of life – to use the expression employed in Gen. 2:7 with reference to man – was swept from the world.... When the Torah states, all that had the *‘breath of the spirit of life in its nostrils,’* the reference is to all those who lived upon the land, not to those who existed in the water.” [Cassuto, 2:95f] “Though similar to 6:17 and 7:15, the mention of *‘breath’* and *‘nostrils’* echoes 2:7. God who gave man the breath of life, thereby making him a living being, now removes it, and so man dies.” [Wenham, 1:183]

expire and die — “Elsewhere in Genesis *‘expire and die’* are used in quick succession to describe the process of dying (25:8, 17; 35:29). To *‘expire’* signifies the moment of transition from life to death. *‘To die’* indicates the condition obtaining after that moment. Here the members of this standard word pair are spaced out, standing at opposite ends of sentences in chiasmic apposition. Such slowing of pace regularly marks the climax of a narrative.” [Wenham, 1:183]

died — “The verb *gāva* ‘[*expired*’] at the beginning of the verse signifies the moment of transition from life to death; this verb – *mûth* – indicates the condition obtaining after that moment.” [Cassuto, 2:96] “*‘Perished’* and *‘wiped out’* (vv. 21, 23) occur earlier in the flood narrative (e.g., 6:7, 17), but *‘died’* is new to the story and only occurs here (cf. 9:29).” [Mathews, 1:381]

v. 23 – And it wiped out everything alive that was on the face of the ground, from mankind to beasts, to creeping things, and to flying creatures of the skies. They were wiped out from the earth. — The earlier expressions are here repeated, in accordance with epic stylistic requirements in such circumstances.

6:7

*I will destroy man whom I
have created*

from the face of the earth,

*both man and beast, creeping
thing*

and birds of the air

7:4

*and I will destroy ... all living
things that I have made.*

from the face of the earth

7:23

He destroyed all living things

*which were on the face of the
ground*

*both man and cattle, creeping
thing*

and bird of the air

Life did not simply die; it was ‘wiped out.’ “Thus the verse ends on a note, as it were, of bitter sorrow: there perished not only the flying creatures, accustomed to fly in the heights of the heavens, and the cattle, cherished by man, and the wild beasts, further removed from man, and the swarming creatures, which are mostly despised by man, but also the most important of the created beings — man; not just a part of the human race, but the whole of it! Even the swarming creatures, which the Torah was not concerned to mention expressly in the previous paragraphs, are mentioned here, in order to reach down to the lowest level in the scale of life and then, with a sudden leap, to ascend to the highest: and every man.” [Cassuto, 2:95]

Only Noah remained, and those that were with him in the ark. — These alone were left after the universal destruction. The survivors do indeed represent a ray of hope for the future, but for the moment they are but a meagre and woeful remnant. “‘Only Noah was left’ points to the righteous remnant of the former world that the patriarch embodies. ‘Remnant’ is derived from the verb ‘remain, left over’ (*shā’ar*), and theologically the idea of remnant depicts the future hope of God’s people as a holy, regathered people (e.g., Jer 23:3; Isa 4:3; 10:20-23; Rom 9:27-28).” [Mathews, 1:381; see also Cassuto, 2:97] **“The use of two passive forms of the verb to describe the fate both of the ungodly [‘they were washed away’] and of the righteous Noah [‘he was left’] suggests strongly that it is Yahweh’s action which controls eternal destiny. Noah does not survive this catastrophe by his own cunning or strength.”** [Hamilton, 1:297]

v. 24 – And the waters were powerful upon the earth for one hundred fifty days. — See lesson 36 for comments concerning day 150.