

The Flood and the Tower of Babel

Old Testament

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By Donald W. Parry

Because of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints have additional knowledge that confirms the reality of these world-changing historical events.

The Flood

Many of us have fond memories learning about Noah and his ark during our days at home and in Primary. Perhaps our parents and teachers held up a picture of Noah preaching to laughing and mocking people as he stood in front of the partially built ark, or perhaps they showed us a picture portraying the ark filled with animals standing on the deck as the great vessel rested in the water. Later, our Sunday School or seminary teachers added to our knowledge of this great man, his righteousness, his missionary work, and the revelations surrounding the building of the ark. As Latter-day Saints, we treasure this sacred, true account of one of God's great prophets who lived so long ago.

Not everyone throughout the modern world, however, accepts the story of Noah and the Flood. Many totally disbelieve the story, seeing it as a simple myth or fiction. Typical of some modern scholars, one author recently discounted the events of the Flood by using such terms as “implausible,” “unacceptable,” and “impossible”; he stated that believers who would hope to provide geologic or other evidence regarding the historicity of the Flood “can be given no assurance that their effort, however sustained, will be successful.”¹ Another author titled his book *The Noah's Ark Nonsense*,² revealing his disbelief that the Flood actually took place.

Still other people accept parts of the Flood story, acknowledging that there may have been a local, charismatic preacher, such as Noah, and a localized flood that covered only a specific area of the world, such as the region of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers or perhaps even the whole of Mesopotamia. Yet these people do not believe in a worldwide or global flood. Both of these groups—those who totally deny the historicity of Noah and the Flood and those who accept parts of the story—are persuaded in their disbelief by the way they interpret modern science. They rely upon geological considerations and theories that postulate it would be impossible for a flood to cover earth's highest mountains, that the geologic evidence (primarily in the fields of stratigraphy and sedimentation) does not indicate a worldwide flood occurred any time during the earth's existence.

There is a third group of people—those who accept the literal message of the Bible regarding Noah, the ark, and the Deluge. Latter-day Saints belong to this group. In spite of the world’s arguments against the historicity of the Flood, and despite the supposed lack of geologic evidence, we Latter-day Saints believe that Noah was an actual man, a prophet of God, who preached repentance and raised a voice of warning, built an ark, gathered his family and a host of animals onto the ark, and floated safely away as waters covered the entire earth. We are assured that these events actually occurred by the multiple testimonies of God’s prophets.

Scriptural Evidence for a Worldwide Flood

Many prophets from two different continents and different eras have identified Noah as a historical, not a mythical, character. These include Enoch (see Moses 7:42–43), Abraham (see Abr. 1:19), Amulek (see Alma 10:22), Moroni (see Ether 6:7), Matthew (see JS—M 1:41–42), Peter (see 2 Pet. 2:5), Joseph Smith (see D&C 84:14–15; D&C 133:54), and Joseph F. Smith (see D&C 138:9, 41). The Lord Jesus Christ himself spoke to the Nephites of the “waters of Noah” (3 Ne. 22:9). Recent latter-day prophets and apostles have similarly spoken of Noah. For example, Elder Howard W. Hunter, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, asked, “Because modernists now declare the story of the flood is unreasonable and impossible, should we disbelieve the account of Noah and the flood as related in the Old Testament?”³

The most voluminous scriptural witness to Noah and the Flood is recorded in the writings of Moses, who dedicated a total of 57 verses in the King James Version to the account (Gen. 6:9–8:19). It is instructive to note that some of Noah’s actual words are preserved in the book of Moses, which introduces them with “And it came to pass that Noah continued his preaching unto the people, saying”—followed by his words: “Hearken, and give heed unto my words; Believe and repent of your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, even as our fathers, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost, that ye may have all things made manifest; and if ye do not this, the floods will come in upon you” (Moses 8:23–24). This text is significant in that it confirms that Noah, like his predecessors, understood the gospel covenant, including the baptismal ordinance and Jesus Christ’s role as Savior.

Moses may have received his information about Noah through direct revelation, or perhaps he used ancient records that were written by one of the eyewitnesses to the Flood, such as Noah himself or one of his sons. Such records, presuming they once existed, are now lost to the world. In the book of Genesis, Moses clearly states that a flood occurred, and the terminology definitely refers to a worldwide flood, as opposed to a localized flood. The Joseph Smith Translation backs up the Genesis account, modifying the wording only slightly.

Said the Lord, “I, even I, do bring a flood 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” (Gen. 6:17; emphasis added in this and other scriptures in this article). The phrases “all flesh ... from under heaven” and “every thing that is in the

earth” indicate a worldwide destruction of all creatures that lived on land. Note that the Inspired Version, translated by the Prophet Joseph Smith, changes “*in the earth*” to “*on the earth*” (JST, Gen. 8:22).

Genesis 7:19–20 [Gen. 7:19–20] states, “*All the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered ... ; and the mountains were covered.*” These verses explicitly state that all of earth’s high mountains (“hills” should read “mountains” here; Hebrew *harim*) were covered by the waters. Lest one believe that the statement “under the whole heaven” is figurative and can be read or interpreted in different ways, a scriptural search through the entire Old Testament reveals that the phrase is used elsewhere only in a universal sense, as it is here; the phrase does not refer to a geographically restricted area (see Deut. 2:25; Deut. 4:19; Job 28:24; Job 37:3; Dan. 9:12). For instance, Job 28:24 also uses the phrase when referring to God’s omniscience, which is certainly not restricted to a specific geographical region on the earth.

Genesis 7:21 [Gen. 7:21] states, “*All flesh died that moved upon the earth, ... every creeping thing ... every man.*” The phrase “all flesh” refers to all land animals, creeping things, and fowls and *all* of humanity, with the exception of those in the ark (see Gen. 7:23). The entry *every* in the *Oxford American Dictionary* reads: “each single one, without exception.” Moses is clearly trying to let us understand that the Flood was universal.

Verse 22 [Gen. 7:22] states, “All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of *all* that was in the dry land, died.” Again the term “all” expresses a sum total. The term “dry land” should be read literally here, having reference to the land masses of our planet.

Verse 23 [Gen. 7:23] states, “*Every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl.*” Moses’ list of those destroyed by the Flood is inclusive; only Noah “remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.”

Genesis 8:5 [Gen. 8:5] states, “In the tenth month ... were the *tops* of the mountains seen.” After the flood, the “waters decreased” until Noah and his group were able to once again see mountaintops.

Verse 9 states, “The waters were on the face of the *whole earth.*” The phrase “on the face of the whole earth” refers to a worldwide flood (see Gen. 1:29; Gen. 11:4, 8, 9).

Taken altogether, these statements should convince every believer in the Bible that the great Deluge was a worldwide event,⁴ not a localized flood that filled only the Mesopotamian or some other region.

Uniformitarianism

Some cite geological data to argue against the Flood. The issue for them, perhaps, revolves around the concept of uniformitarianism,⁵ which has been described simply in this way: “The present is the key to the past.” Uniformitarianism, first postulated by James Hutton in 1795,⁶ proposes three primary concepts: (a) there

were no processes (such as geologic processes) operating in the past which are not operating now; (b) there are no processes operating now which were not operating in the past; and (c) process rates have not changed. Because modern scientists observe geologic change to be relatively slow now, many have naturally concluded that geologic processes have always been slow. Yet uniformitarianism, a premise on which much of geologic science is based, is an idea, not a fact. With our limited knowledge, it presently is a powerful paradigm for examining the earth, and given our ignorance of how the Lord has done things, it does help explain many things. The science that uses the idea has found for us such things as gas, oil, and certain types of minerals.

Yet although uniformitarianism is a powerful perspective, it is still a premise, not a fact. Uniformitarianism cannot explain all of the oddities and anomalies about the earth. Further, it neglects a God who can speak and have the dust of the earth obey, who can move mountains at will, and who can divide the Red Sea. As Latter-day Saints, we have scriptural evidence that God has intervened in the affairs of the earth and modified the landscape on numerous occasions. Among other things, he changed the earth's environment after the Fall, he gave Enoch power to move mountains and rivers before the Deluge, he caused the Flood, and he was the cause of the catastrophic events in America at the Savior's death.

For Latter-day Saints, the Flood is a matter of faith and belief. We believe in many events that today we cannot scientifically explain. For example, in a world where change and death are the norm, the scriptures promise immortality and eternal life. Indeed the scriptures teach that this earth will be burned (see 2 Pet. 3:10), receive a resurrection (D&C 88:26),⁷ and become a celestial kingdom (D&C 88:17–18).⁸ Such future events will make the incident of the Flood look like child's play in comparison.

Further, with all of the advancements of science in recent decades, we still cannot explain how angels are able to defy gravity and descend or ascend through a building's ceiling (see JS—H 1:43); how rapid interplanetary travel is possible for heavenly beings (see D&C 130:6–7); how a righteous man can raise the dead using God's power (see 1 Kgs. 17:17–23); how heavenly messengers can appear to mortals (see D&C 110:2, 11–13); or how Jesus Christ's divine sacrifice is able to atone for our sins.

Though we cannot yet explain the physics or dynamics behind those events, we look forward to the time when the Lord will come and explain them. In the Millennium—a time of great physical change in the earth—he will “reveal all things —

“Things which have passed, and hidden things which no man knew, things of the earth, by which it was made, and the purpose and the end thereof—

“Things most precious, things that are above, and things that are beneath, things that are in the earth, and upon the earth, and in heaven” (D&C 101:32–34).

The Tower of Babel

The account of the tower of Babel, presented in Genesis 11:1–9 [Gen. 11:1–9], is another account about which many persons in the world today disbelieve. It is an account of some of Noah’s descendants who set aside true temple worship and built a “pagan temple,” or “counterfeit temple,”⁹ in the form of a great tower. Two statements hint at an attempt to build a temple: “Let us build ... a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven” (4) recalls one of the purposes of temples: to serve as places where God and man can meet. “Let us make us a name” (Gen. 11:4) recalls another purpose of temples: to serve as holy places where individuals take upon themselves the name of Jesus Christ. But the rebellious people under the leadership of King Nimrod lacked real priesthood keys and the authority to build temples; they lacked the divine power to make sacred covenants in the Lord’s name. Other parallels have been made between the tower of Babel and the Lord’s temple, both in antiquity and in our times, helping Latter-day Saints, more than any other people on earth, to understand what those in Babel were vainly attempting to duplicate.¹⁰

The tower of Babel had a momentous impact on the events of world history, occurring not too long after the Flood and immediately before the confusion of tongues. The confusion of tongues came as a curse from the Lord because of the wicked people’s attempt to build the counterfeit temple, or tower, as Moses explained (Gen. 11:5–7). Before the tower, “the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (Gen. 11:1), but the building of the tower brought the Lord’s decision to confuse the tongues so the people could “not understand one another’s speech” (Gen. 11:7), preventing further defilement of the Lord’s sacred ordinances. The curse, in addition, resulted in the scattering of the people “upon the face of the whole earth,” a phrase given three different times for emphasis (see Gen. 11:4, 8, 9).

The Akkadian or Babylonian word *babel* means “gate of God.” The word translates from Hebrew into English as “confusion” or “confound”—hence Moses’ text, “Therefore is the name of it called *Babel*; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth” (Gen. 11:9).

For some in the modern world, the historicity of the tower of Babel story, as with the Flood, is often discounted. One modern school of thought considers the account to be nothing more than an “artful parable” and an “old tale.”¹¹ But Latter-day Saints accept the story as it is presented in Genesis. Further, we have the second witness of the Book of Mormon. The title page of the Book of Mormon explains that the book of Ether “is a record of the people of Jared, who were scattered at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, when they were building a tower to get to heaven.” The book of Ether itself then tells of when “Jared came forth with his brother and their families, with some others and their families, *from the great tower*, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, and swore in his wrath that they should be scattered upon all the face of the earth” (Ether 1:33).

Principles and Lessons for Our Time

The stories of the tower of Babel and the Flood present a number of doctrinal principles and applications for Latter-day Saints today. With reference to the tower of Babel, we find the following interesting observations and parallels for our day:

1. Every time we hear foreign tongues (including English), we can be reminded that at one time “the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (Gen. 11:1). The hundreds of languages on the earth today stand as a witness that there existed long ago a tower of Babel in the land of Shinar.

Yet in spite of the confusion of tongues so long ago, the gospel of Jesus Christ is reversing the effects of Babel. In the context of a temple dedication, Elder Spencer W. Kimball taught: “someone said yesterday, there never should have been a Babel. There having been a Babel, it is in reverse now. The confusion of Babel is being overcome. The Finns and the Dutch and the British, the Germans and the French and the Hollanders, the Scandinavians, Italians, Austrians all meeting under one roof! All of them heard the voice of the prophet of the Lord. Everyone of them heard his message in his own tongue. Everyone of them heard the ordinances of the gospel, the ordinances of the temple, in his own tongue. The confusion of Babel is in reverse.”¹²

2. Because of her great iniquity, ancient Babel, or Babylon, has become a long-standing scriptural symbol for “wickedness” (see D&C 133:14). Specifically, Babylon represents any people who “have strayed from mine [the Lord’s] ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant;

“They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall” (D&C 1:15–16).

In antiquity, Babylon attempted to imitate Zion, attempting to replace the temple with its great tower, and Babylon’s false gods were substitutes for the Lord God. Unfortunately, Babylon has not changed in time.

3. The word “scatter[ed]” is found three times in the story of the tower (Gen. 11:4, 8–9). Nations are scattered as the result of wickedness. The opposite of scattering is gathering, and this dispensation is the era for gathering. The rebellious people who followed Nimrod were *scattered* from Babel, and in our dispensation the Lord’s people are to *gather* from Babel, or Babylon: “*Gather ... upon the land of Zion. ... Go ye out from Babylon. ... Go ye out of Babylon; gather ye out from among the nations, from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. ... Go ye out from among the nations, even from Babylon, from the midst of wickedness, which is spiritual Babylon*” (D&C 133:4–7, 14).

In addition to carefully studying scriptural teachings related to the tower of Babel, a study of the Flood and the last days provides valuable instruction for us:

1. Those who hearkened unto the prophet Noah's voice and repented were baptized and received the Holy Ghost and obtained a spiritual and a "temporal salvation" (Moses 7:42). Likewise, those who follow the prophets in this dispensation, from the Prophet Joseph Smith to President Gordon B. Hinckley, and who accept the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins, will be saved.
2. Noah's contemporaries "sought his life" (Moses 8:26); "every man was lifted up in the imagination of the thoughts of his heart, being only evil continually" (Moses 8:22); they failed to hearken unto the words of their prophet (Moses 8:24); and they were guilty of riotous living, described as "eating and drinking, and marrying and giving in marriage" (Moses 8:21). The evil deeds and same type of lifestyle that belonged to people in Noah's time are being repeated in our own day and will be present at the time of the Second Coming, as the Savior himself prophesied (see Matt. 24:37–39).
3. The disobedient of Noah's day revealed "until the day that [Noah] entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away" (Matt. 24:38–39). Similarly, the wicked at the last days will not know of the destruction at Christ's coming until it comes and destroys them all as did the Flood. The Savior taught: "But as it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be also at the coming of the Son of Man" (JS—M 1:41).
4. Latter-day prophets teach that the Flood or the total immersion of the earth in water represents the earth's required baptism. Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained: "Latter-day Saints look upon the earth as a living organism, one which is gloriously filling 'the measure of its creation.' They look upon the flood as a baptism of the earth, symbolizing a cleansing of the impurities of the past, and the beginning of a new life. This has been repeatedly taught by the leaders of the Church. The deluge was an immersion of the earth in water." He writes that the removal of earth's wicked inhabitants in the Flood represents that which occurs in our own baptism for the remission of sins.¹³
5. The destruction of the disobedient at Noah's time anticipates the devastation of the wicked at the time of Christ's coming in glory, when the earth will receive its baptism by fire. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "In the days of Noah, God destroyed the world by a flood, and He has promised to destroy it by fire in the last days."¹⁴ The prophet Enoch saw in vision Noah's ark, seeing "that the Lord smiled upon it, and held it in his own hand; but upon the residue of the wicked the floods came and swallowed them up" (Moses 7:43). Likewise, the Lord has said that he will smile upon or uphold the obedient in the last days, while at the same time smiting the wicked with his judgments.

Thus, although there are many in our day who consider the accounts of the Flood and tower of Babel to be fiction, Latter-day Saints affirm their reality. We rejoice in the many truths and lessons to be learned from these two accounts, as well as from all the stories of the Old Testament.

Notes

1. David F. Siemens Jr., “More Problems with Flood Geology,” in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, Dec. 1992, 234.
2. Howard M. Teeple, *The Noah’s Ark Nonsense* (1978).
3. “Where, Then, Is Hope?” *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1970, 115.
4. Modern prophets have also taught that the Flood was worldwide (see, for example, Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. [1954–56], 2:319).
5. I appreciate Perry J. Hardin, BYU professor of geography, for helping me understand the concept of uniformitarianism. The above is adapted from personal correspondence dated 2 July 1997; I am responsible, however, for the presentation of the thoughts on the idea.
6. Hutton’s book was entitled *Theory of the Earth*. Charles Lyell was the next well-known disciple of the theory and built on Hutton’s work in his 1830 book, *Principles of Geology*.
7. See also *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:74. “The earth, as a living body, will have to die, and be resurrected, for it, too, has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.”
8. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., 5 vols. (1957–66), 2:210.
9. Lee Donaldson, V. Dan Rogers, and David Rolph Seely correctly identify the tower of Babel as a “counterfeit temple” (“I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1994, 60).
10. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (1980), 156; *Ensign*, Feb. 1994, 60.
11. Robert B. Laurin, “The Tower of Babel Revisited,” in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor*, ed. Gary A. Tuttle (1978), 143, 144.
12. “Report on Europe,” *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1955, 946.
13. *Evidences and Reconciliations* (1960), 127–28; see also *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:320–21.
14. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938), 337.

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