

Genesis 6-9: Does 'All' Always Mean All?

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ABSTRACT

The Scriptural account of the Flood is the ultimate basis of our understanding of that event. Some today claim that the Scriptural word 'all' doesn't necessarily support a global interpretation, but it is absolutely clear that when the linguistic context is examined that argument is hermeneutically flawed. Instead, the abundant use of the word 'all' in Genesis 6-9, God's reason for sending the Flood, the 're-creation' intention of the Genesis 9 account, and God's post-Flood covenant all shed light on the Flood's global extent. Coupled with all the other available arguments and evidences there can then be absolutely no doubt that the Scriptures teach a geographically global Flood.

In the ongoing debate over the extent of Noah's Flood many people have argued that since the word 'all' doesn't always mean 'all without exception', we therefore have exegetical warrant to posit a local Flood. They suggest that when the text says '*all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered*' (Genesis 7:19), that it doesn't really mean every single mountain on the whole Earth, but is simply referring to the mountains in the region of Mesopotamia. To support this, they often cite other passages in Scripture where 'all' has a restricted meaning.¹

How should one respond to an argument such as this one? Does this mean that Noah's Flood may have been local after all? Many people find this line of reasoning very convincing. However, in this brief paper I hope to demonstrate that this argument has a fundamental hermeneutical flaw and therefore cannot be used to promote a local Flood.

THE HERMENEUTICAL FLAW

The term 'hermeneutics' is a theological word referring to one's method of interpretation. In other words, it reveals what principles or processes a theologian uses to understand and interpret the Bible. In this section, I intend to demonstrate that the argument cited above has a fatal hermeneutical flaw and therefore is not valid.

One of the most fundamental of all hermeneutical principles is that we are to interpret a particular passage in light of its context. This principle is simply derived from

an understanding of how language works, that is, linguistics. Language doesn't operate on the basis of individual, isolated words (such as 'all'), but rather if one desires to understand a particular passage he must understand the words in light of the surrounding sentences, the sentences in light of the surrounding paragraphs, and the paragraphs in light of the surrounding larger sections. In other words, the meaning of individual words or propositions is determined by their context.

Perhaps an example would help clarify how context determines the meaning of a word: What if I asked you what I meant by the word 'hand'? You would respond by saying that I could mean any number of different things (called the 'semantic range'):-

- (1) A physical, literal hand.
- (2) Physical assistance.
- (3) A round of applause.
- (4) A pointer on a clock.

But, without more information you would not know which definition I was using. However, if I went on to say, 'Give me a hand', then you would be able to narrow down what I meant. You would probably be pretty sure that I wasn't using definition 1, but still unsure about which of the other four definitions I was using. Finally, if I gave you even more information and said, 'Give me a hand with this heavy box', then you would know for certain that I was using definition 2. The point here is that you didn't know what I meant based purely on the use of the word 'hand' isolated from its context. As the amount of revealed context

increased, it was easier to understand what I meant. The hermeneutical principle here is that context helps determine meaning.

How does this apply to the situation with the word 'all' as it's used in the account of Noah's Flood? Well, when we read Genesis 7:19 and are told that 'all the high mountains' were covered, we have to decide between the choices for the meaning of 'all' (Hebrew: כָּל). For the sake of the discussion at hand we need only decide between two main choices:-

- (1) 'all' in a narrow, limited sense, or
- (2) 'all' absolutely, without exception.²³

How will we decide between these two choices? We cannot do it simply by looking at the word כָּל isolated from its surrounding context. We must consider all the data in the immediate context and draw our determination from there.

Now it is important to note that there are legitimate times in the Scriptures when 'all' clearly is not referring to all without exception and must be understood as limited in some way. For example, Mark 1:5, speaking of John the Baptist, says, *'The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him'*. Does this mean that every last person in Jerusalem and Judea went to the Jordan to get baptised? Does that mean King Herod and Pilate were also baptised by John? No, this use of 'all' clearly can be understood as limited due to the historical context. Also consider Luke 2:1, *'And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed'* (King James Version). Did Caesar send a decree to every single part of the globe? No, once again, the context compels us to understand this as the Roman world. There are many other examples like this where 'all' is used in a clearly limited sense.⁴ We can determine which meaning is intended by a careful study of the context.

The hermeneutical flaw comes when those who advocate a local Flood say that since 'all' is limited in some places in the Bible therefore it is also limited in Genesis 7:19 and the other surrounding verses. However, this line of reasoning totally ignores the role of context in interpretation. If 'all' has a limited application in Mark 1:5, then does that necessitate a limited use in Genesis 7:19? **Simply because 'all' is limited in some contexts doesn't necessarily imply that it is limited in other contexts.** Those who reason in this manner often fail to offer any reasons why the context of Genesis 6-9 compels us to accept a local Flood. So, in the end, the advocates of the local Flood are entirely inconsistent. They argue that the 'all' in Mark 1:5 must be limited because the context compels them. However, when they turn to Genesis they conveniently forget about context and simply pronounce that 'all doesn't always mean all'.

Hermeneutical inconsistencies such as this are dangerous, because they attack the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture simply says that the Scriptures can be clearly understood (perspicuous means 'clear'). That doesn't mean that all doctrines or teachings are equally clear, or that the Scriptures

don't require careful study. It simply means that what the Bible teaches **can be known**. This doctrine guards against the Catholic idea that one needs a priest to interpret the Bible. In addition, it guards against the common liberal idea that one can't ever know for sure what the Bible says and that any interpretation is therefore valid. Local Flood advocates who are guilty of this hermeneutical flaw end up threatening the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, because they suggest that one just can't know what the author intended by the use of the word 'all'. Instead of demonstrating their case from the careful exegesis of the surrounding context they appeal to other texts in the Bible where 'all' has a limited meaning. This strategy ends up shedding doubt over what the author meant by the word 'all', and this in turn allows them to say that the text is 'unclear' concerning the extent of the Flood. If they can portray the Flood passage as 'unclear', then they can say that a local Flood is a 'possibility'. However, as Bible-believing Christians our desire is not simply to find out what is **possible**, but our desire is to find out what the text **teaches**. And to find out what the text teaches we must engage in a careful study of the context.

So, we have seen that the fatal flaw for those who use this argument is that they fail to understand the proper use of context. Of course, not all who posit a local Flood are guilty of this hermeneutical flaw. However, if they are to argue that 'all' in Genesis 7:19 has a limited scope, then they must demonstrate that from the context. Does the context support their view? Let us proceed to the next section to find out.

CONTEXTUAL ARGUMENTS FOR A GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING OF 'ALL'

There has been much written over the years about why Noah's Flood had to be global. Following are some of the arguments:

- (1) If the Flood was local then why would Noah spend over 100 years building an Ark when all he had to do was move to a part of the globe where the Flood waters would not reach?
- (2) Why build an Ark over 400 feet long if it was only a local Flood?
- (3) Is it not hard to imagine a local Flood that lasted over a year?
- (4) If the Flood was local then did God break his promise not to Flood the world again? Hasn't the Mesopotamian Valley been flooded many times since Noah?

All these are good arguments and make a strong case for the fact that the context compels us to understand the Flood as global. It would seem that we could stop here and confidently conclude that the context warrants a global understanding of 'all'. But, I hope in this section to offer some further considerations why the context compels us to see the Flood as global:-

(1) The abundant use of the word **כָּל** in Genesis 6-9.

In the space of these four short chapters dealing with Noah's Flood the word **כָּל** ('all') is used 72 times. That is an enormous amount considering the entire Flood narrative covers only 85 verses (Genesis 6:1-9:17). The word **כָּל** only occurs 342 times in the entire book of Genesis (which is 50 chapters long). Thus, 21 per cent of all occurrences are found in these four chapters.⁵ Figure 1 depicts the number of occurrences of **כָּל** throughout the entire book of Genesis. There is an obvious concentration in chapters 6-9.

The large occurrence of **כָּל** is certainly not conclusive evidence of a universal Flood in and of itself. However, it seems clear that the author, Moses, is going out of his way to convince the reader that the Flood covered 'all' the Earth

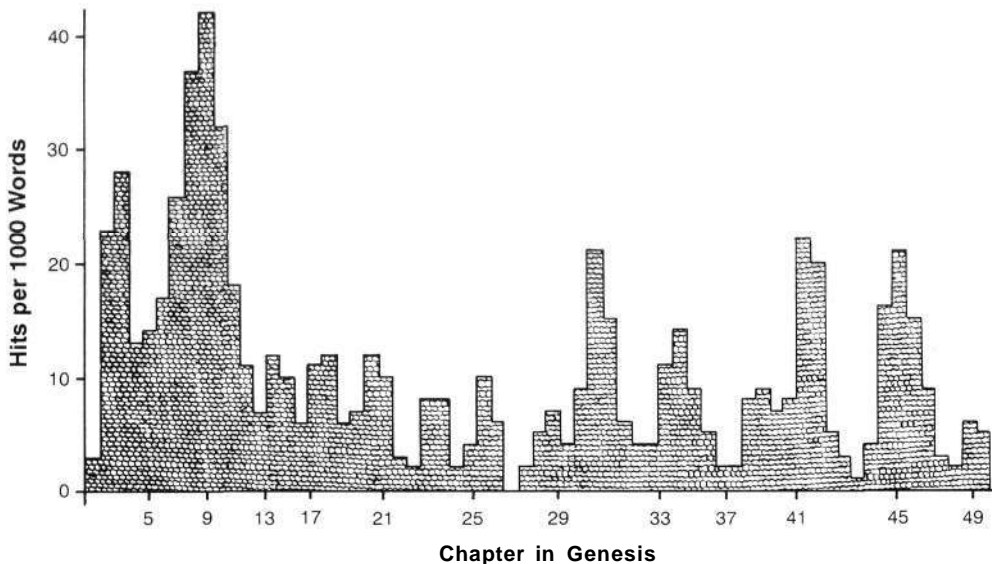


Figure 1. The number of occurrences of the word 'all' (**כָּל**) throughout the entire book of Genesis.

and wiped out 'all' life. This vivid emphasis is compelling in light of all the other contextual evidence already mentioned, and in light of what follows.

(2) God's reason for sending the Flood sheds light on the extent of the Flood.

Why did God send the Flood? Because, 'The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become.... The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth' (Genesis 6:5). In contrast to the rest of the Earth we read, 'But, Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord . . . Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time' (Genesis 6:8-9). Now, if the Flood was local and only the humans in the Mesopotamian Valley were killed, then one must ask why God didn't also wipe out all the humans living elsewhere? Was God only grieved that He had made the humans in the Mesopotamian Valley, but not grieved that He had made the humans elsewhere? Were not

the humans elsewhere also wicked? If they were righteous then why did God single out Noah as the only one who was found to be righteous? Are we to believe the whole Earth was righteous except the Mesopotamian Valley? And what do we make of the express statement in Genesis 7:23 which says that 'only Noah was left, together with those that were with him in the Ark'! **It seems abundantly clear that God sent the Flood to destroy corrupt mankind, and therefore every single man but Noah and his family were destroyed.** This is also confirmed in two other considerations:-

- (a) All of mankind is traced through Noah's three sons in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10), and
- (b) Peter's first epistle makes it clear that only 'eight souls' were spared (I Peter 3:20).

Now, most local Flood advocates, feeling the weight of the above considerations, recognise the fact that all humans died in the Flood. Consequently, they suggest that all the human population of the day was located in the Mesopotamian Valley. However, does this really solve the problem? I would suggest this solution breaks down for two reasons:-

- (a) It is highly unlikely that the population of the Earth at that time could have fitted within such a small region. Even conservative estimates of population growth show this suggestion to be untenable.⁶ What is especially amazing about this suggestion is that most local Flood advocates tend to believe in an ancient Earth, which would certainly ensure that by this time the population growth would have far surpassed the Mesopotamian Valley,
- (b) God's reason for sending the Flood was not just because humans were corrupt, but because 'all flesh' was corrupt; that is, animals as well. Most people think that God's only intention was to destroy mankind; however, the actual term used throughout this entire Flood narrative is 'all flesh' (**כָּל־בְּשָׂר**).⁷ In Genesis 7:17 God says, 'I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy **all flesh** (**כָּל־בְּשָׂר**) in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish.' Why did God want to destroy 'all flesh'? Because, as Genesis 7:12 tells us, '**all flesh** had corrupted their way upon the earth'. These verses make it clear that the author is clearly referring to both man and animals. This is seen in the

fact that the author uses the term 'all flesh' to refer to the animals in Genesis 7:19: '*And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark.*' Also, when the Flood waters came we read; '*All flesh that moved on the earth perished, birds and cattle and beasts and every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth and all mankind.*' So, we can conclude that God sent the Flood to destroy both man and animal because both man and animal were corrupt.⁸

How does this relate to the question of the extent of the Flood? It seems clear that humans and animals are joined together as a collective group with the term 'all flesh', thus if the destruction of 'all flesh' in Genesis 7:21 means every human is destroyed, then it must also mean every animal is destroyed. Otherwise, we are left with linguistic nonsense. How can the statement 'all flesh perished' mean that **every** human perished but only some animals perished? It is therefore necessary to conclude that all the animals on the Earth died in the Flood. This presents a problem for the local Flood advocates for they would have to now suggest that all animals on the Earth at that time lived only in the Mesopotamian Valley. But, surely this is absurd considering the number of animals that existed on the Earth. It would be impossible for the entire human population **and** the entire animal population to all be contained within the Mesopotamian Valley region. For God to destroy all the humans and animals He would have to flood the entire globe.⁹

If, in spite of the above arguments, the local Flood advocates insist that animals lived outside the Flood area, then we would have to ask why God didn't destroy the rest of the animals on the Earth? Are we to think that God was only grieved that He had made the animals in the Mesopotamian Valley, but not grieved that He had made the animals elsewhere (Genesis 6:7)? Were not all animals everywhere on the Earth corrupted as a result of the Fall? So, why would God not destroy all of them if the very reason He sent the Flood was because 'all flesh' was corrupt (Genesis 6:12)? Besides, if God wasn't going to destroy all the animals, then why did He have Noah take such extreme efforts to get all the animals on board the Ark? It seems these texts just don't make sense when viewed from the perspective of a local Flood.

(3) The account in Genesis 9 is clearly intended to be a 'Re-Creation'.

When Noah and his family get off the Ark many things happen that tell us the writer is drawing a definitive parallel to the initial creation. We see several things in common with Genesis 1:-

- (a) In Genesis 9:1 God gives mankind the exact same commission as in Genesis 1:28— '*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*'
- (b) Once again God gives man (Noah and his family) dominion over '*every beast on the earth*' (Genesis 9:2). This clearly parallels the time when God granted Adam dominion over all the beasts of the Earth in Genesis

1:28.

- (c) Man is given a command about what he can and cannot eat (Genesis 9:4—5) which parallels Genesis 1:29-30.¹⁰

This parallelism shows that in view here is a 're-creation' account. This is significant for two reasons. First, the theme of 're-creation' here clearly indicates that Noah, his family, and the animals with him were the only creatures alive on the Earth. God had completely destroyed His previous creation and now, in a sense, He is 'starting over'. But, He can only start over if the previous creation has been destroyed. Remember *that 'God looked on the earth and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth'* (Genesis 6:12). It was 'all flesh', including animals, that were corrupt. Now, what sense would it make to start over if there still remained millions of creatures elsewhere in the world that still were corrupt?

Second, the parallels with Genesis 1 are important, because if God commissioned Adam to multiply and fill the entire globe, then his new commission to Noah applied to the entire globe as well. If Adam and his descendants were to rule the entire Earth, then so were Noah and his family. Thus, when God tells Noah to '*fill the earth*' (Genesis 9:1), what 'earth' is God referring to? Does God mean the whole globe? If the local Flood advocates say God does **not** mean the whole globe, then are we to believe that Noah's dominion was only over Mesopotamia? Are he and his family only to multiply and fill Mesopotamia? This is clearly nonsense. But, if the local Flood advocates recognise this and confess that indeed 'earth' in Genesis 9:1 certainly means the entire globe, then they have a problem. If 'earth' in Genesis 9:1 clearly refers to the entire globe, then why would 'earth' in Genesis 8:13 refer to only Mesopotamia since it is in the same context? This is a clear inconsistency in their position. Thus, if they are to be fair with the text they must admit that 'earth' in Genesis 8:13 also refers to the entire globe as it does in Genesis 9:1.

(4) God's Covenant was with the entire globe.

God declares His covenant to Noah in Genesis 9:9-10 — '*7 now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you — the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you — every living creation on the earth.*' It is clear that Genesis 9:9-10 is teaching that all who came off the Ark composed every living creature on the Earth. Thus, when God made a covenant with them he was in fact making a covenant with every single living creature on the planet. This confirms our conclusions in point 2 above that all other animals and humans on the Earth perished except those who were on the Ark. This fact would necessitate a global Flood.

In addition, the local Flood theory can simply make no sense of this covenant. If the Flood was local are we to really believe that this covenant has nothing to do with the millions of animals (and perhaps humans) elsewhere on the Earth? Does God's promise to uphold the seasons and earth

cycles (Genesis 8:22) only apply to Noah's descendants and the descendants of these animals with him, but not to the millions of animals and/or humans elsewhere? Is this covenant only a covenant with the Mesopotamian Valley? If so, then why does He give a rainbow in the sky *'as a sign of a covenant between me and the earth'* (Genesis 9:13)? And remember that the word 'earth' here is in the same context of 'earth' in Genesis 9:1, which was shown to clearly be referring to the whole globe (see point 3 above). The context clearly points to the covenant as applying to the entire globe. Therefore, if the covenant applies to the entire globe, then the Flood must have covered the entire globe.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that there is more than sufficient evidence from the surrounding context to determine that 'all' in Genesis 7:19 clearly refers to the entire globe. The local Flood advocates have yet to demonstrate from the context of Genesis 6-9 that 'all' in no way can mean the entire globe. Instead, they rely on an argument based on a fatal hermeneutical flaw that ends up doing damage to the perspicuity of Scripture, rather than enhancing our understanding of it.

One final question must be asked. If Moses, the author, wanted to make it any clearer that the Flood covered the entire globe, what else could he have said? What more could he have done? He told us: *'And the water prevailed more and more upon the earth, so that all the high mountains everywhere under the heavens were covered'* (Genesis 7:19). It seems there is nothing more that could have been said to show us that the Flood covered the entire Earth. In the end we must ask ourselves, do we believe Moses? Christ said in John 5:46-47, *'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But, since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?'*

REFERENCES

1. See Mark 1:5, Luke 2:1, Acts 4:21, Acts 21:28 and John 12:32.
2. Brown, R, Driver, S. R. and Briggs, C. A., 1979. **Hebrew-English Lexicon**, Hendrickson, pp. 481-183.
These are various other aspects of the definition for , but these are not immediately relevant here. To study the detailed nuances, see this lexicon, and that of Ref. 3.
3. Holladay, W. L. (ed), 1988. **A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, pp. 156-157.
4. This would apply to texts such as Colossians 1:23, Romans 1:8 and 1 Thessalonians 1:7-20. The context warrants understanding 'all' as limited at least to some extent. There is no reason to posit any theories, as some have suggested, about how there were no people living in the Western Hemisphere.
5. Accordance computer software by the Gramcord Institute.
6. Whitcomb, J. and Morris, H., 1961. **The Genesis Flood**, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, pp. 23-32.
7. The New International Version (NIV) fails to capture this fact in its translation. It is entirely inconsistent in its interpretation and uses several different English words in place of the word 'flesh'.
8. The fact that animals were 'corrupt' would also be a result of the Fall. Many changes in creation took place at the Fall (thorns, pain in childbirth, curse on the ground), and it seems that the animals also grew violent and corrupt as well. This is confirmed by the fact that they were originally created in a world without death where everything was vegetarian (Genesis 1:29-30).
9. This is especially evident in the fact that even birds died in the Flood (Genesis 7:21). Would they not have been able to escape a local Flood to dry land?
10. Kline, M. G., 1993. **Kingdom Prologue**, pp 136-137.
There are many more exegetical parallels that support this conclusion which space does not allow us to discuss. For more see Kline's work. However, I would not recommend Kline's views on the early chapters of Genesis nor his understanding of the extent of the Flood, but his treatment of theological themes is excellent.

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