

The Flood was historically global, not hyperbolically global

The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, theology, and the deluge debate

Tremper Longman III and John H. Walton, with a contribution by Stephen O. Moshier

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It was bound to happen eventually. The account of Noah's Flood has now been subjected to John Walton's interpretive method, which was previously set forth in other books from his influential 'Lost World' series. This latest installment by Walton, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School, was co-authored with Tremper Longman III, Distinguished Scholar of Biblical Studies at Westmont College.

In the same way that Walton previously insisted that Genesis tells us nothing about the material origins of the universe or the biological origins of humanity,^{1,2} Longman and Walton now claim that, although the Flood was a historical event, the biblical text does not provide a *description* of the actual event. Instead, Scripture only tells us about the Flood's theological *meaning* using figurative language. Longman and Walton maintain that the Flood is depicted *literarily* as a global event, but this is intentionally hyperbolic language employed only to highlight the Flood's great significance. As a historical event, they say, the Flood cannot have been global, because this is precluded by the geologic record.

But, as will be shown, this revisionist understanding of Noah's Flood is ultimately unfaithful to the inspired text. The Bible does not merely depict the Flood as hyperbolically global, but historically global.

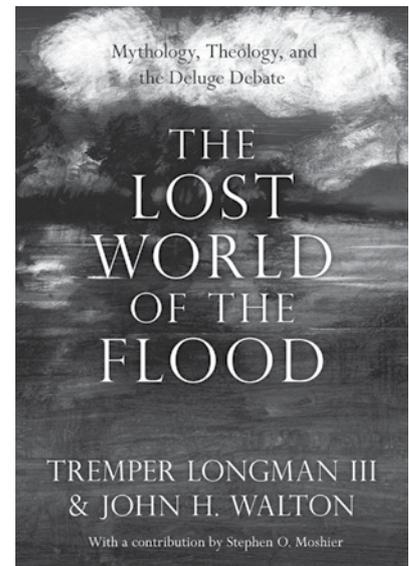
Tangential topics

Longman and Walton address a variety of other subjects associated with the Flood as well, such as Cain and Abel, the Genesis genealogies, the Nephilim, Babel, geological evidence, and widespread cultural flood legends. For sake of space, this review will focus on their primary case for a hyperbolic Flood, and leave these supplemental concerns to be addressed by others.³

Useful concessions

Though Longman's and Walton's understanding of the Flood account is generally at odds with the church's historic view of the Flood as a real, global, catastrophic disaster, it does align at various points. This is helpful to creationists, because we can allow our critics to make our case for us! For example, Longman and Walton say that the *toledot* structure of Genesis shows that it was intended to record a "sequence of past events" (p. 17). Likewise, the authors insist that the Genesis Flood story was not borrowed from Babylonian myth (p. 80).

Regarding the extent of the Flood, they affirm many arguments creationists have long used to show that the text describes a global Flood. Longman and Walton think that the narrative as a whole is hyperbolic, but



they argue strongly that the Flood is *depicted* as worldwide, not local. They insist that the following points prove the worldwide nature of the Flood (pp. 45–49):

- All of humanity was destroyed, which could not be accomplished by a regional flood.
- Noah needed to take animals, including birds, on board.
- God told Noah to build an enormous Ark rather than instruct him to move.
- The sources for the water (all the springs of the great deep, floodgates of the heavens) indicate universality.
- The water was deep enough to cover the mountains (including the region of Ararat) by 15 cubits.

Furthermore, Longman and Walton offer multiple reasons why, according to the account's portrayal, the Flood must have killed all of humanity except for the Ark's eight passengers:

- Human sin was universal (pp. 45, 48).
- The Flood was the solution to God's regret over creating mankind (pp. 45, 48).
- The judgment was a reversal of creation—a 'do-over' (pp. 46, 48–49).

- The text describes a worldwide Flood, which would leave no survivors (p. 45).
- The text uses “universalistic rhetoric” to portray all people and animals as destroyed by the Flood (p. 70).⁴

Bait-and-switch propositions

Unfortunately, many of the book’s 17 chapter titles, called “propositions”, are misleading. What is argued in the text of the chapter often goes well beyond the stated thesis. For example, here is Proposition 1: “Genesis is an Ancient Document”. How banal. Who disagrees? But this chapter actually discusses the Bible as a whole, not just Genesis. Also, it leaps from the reasonable claim that we must understand the Bible according to its historical context to assert these non sequiturs: (1) the Bible does not intend to teach any science, (2) its authority does not extend to science, and (3) it contains scientific falsehoods. Thus, a more accurate title for this chapter would have been: “The Bible’s divine authority does not ensure that it accurately describes the world”. But methinks that would have given away the game.

Proposition 2 is: “Genesis 1–11 Makes Claims About Real Events in a Real Past.” Again, no disagreement there. But a more accurate title would have been: “Genesis 1–11 makes reference to real events, but it emphasizes their spiritual meaning over historically correct descriptions.”

Proposition 3 is: “Genesis 1–11 Uses Rhetorical Devices.” What they meant was: “The figurative language in Genesis 1–11 is so pervasive that it prevents us from reconstructing any past events mentioned therein.”

Limiting biblical authority

Despite Davis Young’s blurb on p. ii, which praises the authors

for their “evangelical high view of Scripture”, Longman and Walton don’t have one. Sure, they profess to believe in inerrancy, and they rightly say that inerrancy applies to all that the Bible “intends to teach” (p. 167). But, for them, these are weasel words, because these authors severely constrict what they’ll allow the Bible to intend to teach. They say the Bible’s “affirmations are not of a scientific nature” (pp. 10–11). Ironically, Longman and Walton are the ones imposing a modern secular/sacred dichotomy on the text, so that even though the Bible is replete with factual descriptions of nature and historical events, only the ‘spiritual meaning’ carries the authority. In the author’s minds, then, the Bible can wrongly say that the earth is flat (p. 153), that the sky is solid (p. 11), and that our hearts help us to think (p. 9), yet somehow without affirming such things. However, this is not the way Jesus and the New Testament authors viewed Scripture, as demonstrated by the fact that they treated historical and scientific details in Old Testament narratives as reliable revelation.⁵

Longman and Walton also approvingly cite the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, when it suits them, to rightly defend the Bible’s use of hyperbole (pp. 34–35). But, they seem to have skipped Article XII, which says:

“WE DENY that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions *in the fields of history and science*. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation *and the flood* [emphasis added].”⁶

A statement made repeatedly throughout the book, so often that it becomes a mantra, is, “The events are not inspired but rather their presentation and interpretation in the biblical text are” (p. 92, cf. 12, 18, 93, 95, 177).

One wonders who Longman and Walton are attempting to argue against here. Creationists do not say that the Flood event itself is the object of inspiration. This would be a category error. God breathes out authoritative words (2 Timothy 3:16), but events are not words. Nevertheless, when Longman and Walton apply this notion to the Flood account, they say, “There was a real, cataclysmic event, but the Bible does not *describe* that event authoritatively”, while it “*does interpret* that event authoritatively [emphasis in original]” (p. 11). So, then, they see the description given in the text as some combination of two possibilities. First, it may be that the description of the Flood is factually wrong, though not authoritative (fitting in their category of ‘culturally conditioned’). Second, it may be that the description of the Flood is not intended as a literal description (fitting in their category of ‘rhetorically shaped’). However, the driving assumption behind these false alternatives is that Scripture cannot authoritatively communicate anything that may be subjected to scientific analysis. But what if God wanted to? He doesn’t have to reveal the quadratic equation in order to say something that would qualify as science. He could simply state that water once covered the mountains by 15 cubits, which is exactly what He did.

Hyperbole hypothesis is a stretch

Though Longman and Walton maintain that “Only the most gullible” would deny the hyperbolic nature of the Flood (p. 39), let me risk their contempt. I do not deny that there are some hyperbolic elements in the Flood narrative, like their example from Genesis 6:5, which describes the wickedness of mankind by saying that “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (p. 38). As Longman and Walton point out, surely not every motive for every

thought was wicked, including those of righteous Noah (Genesis 6:9). Still, the claim that the extent of the Flood was exaggerated for effect is utterly unconvincing.

Poor parallels

One problem is that the authors' examples of hyperbole are disanalogous to the Flood account. On p. 49, they say the language in the Flood narrative is like describing the Holocaust as the "total annihilation of European Jewry". But, as is typical with hyperbole, this is a simple exaggeration of size/scope within a single, short statement. The Flood, by contrast, is a complex narrative carried through several chapters, with multiple, varied indications that the event was actually worldwide and wiped out all of humanity.

Or, take the authors' example of the Israelite conquest in Joshua 1–12. In several summary statements in Joshua 10 and 11, it says that "Joshua took the entire land" and "left no survivors". But in Joshua 13 and Judges 1, much territory still remained to be conquered. Longman and Walton say:

"The author is intentionally using universalistic language and intends to convey, rhetorically, that the conquest was complete, but that did not correspond to the actual geographical scope of the conquest, only to the significance of the conquest" (p. 32).

I grant that some of the phrasings are hyperbolic because the author of Joshua is focusing on the victories, but that is not to say that the specifics of the account are ahistorical. The text describes in accurate detail which areas were conquered and which kings were defeated. So, what we have here are islands of hyperbole in a larger non-hyperbolic narrative.

But note that this is not what Longman and Walton are claiming about the Flood account. They say that the real (local) flood event is so

obscured by the hyperbole that "we cannot reconstruct the event" (p. 146). They say that all of the elaborate detail in the Flood narrative is not meant as a historical description. It's all just part of the rhetorical shaping of the story. Really?

Let's consider some of these details. Longman and Walton dismissively say that many of the specifics in the Flood account, like the duration of the Flood and the precise size of the Ark, "are incidental and don't matter" (p. 63). But how do they know this? Dismissing the details is a convenient way of not having to account for their presence. But it makes far more sense if the following were recorded due to the fact that they are historical realities.

- The Ark was $300 \times 50 \times 30$ cubits, was made of gopher wood, had 3 decks, one door, a roof, a window, and was covered inside and out with pitch.⁷
- Animals went on in pairs (unclean) and sevens (clean).
- The mountains were covered by 15 cubits.
- The Ark landed specifically in the region of Ararat, which Longman and Walton acknowledge is a location uniquely given in the biblical account (p. 80).
- An elaborate chronology for the Flood year is given with precision down to particular days in specific months in a specific year of Noah's life.

- Noah released particular birds in a particular order.

If these kinds of details do not correspond to reality and serve no particular purpose, the account is filled with extraneous twaddle. Longman and Walton say you can tell that a passage is figurative when you "have to work hard to take it any other way" (p. 25) but, here, they are the ones having to dance around the plain sense of the text.

Truncated Noahic covenant

Another problem for Longman and Walton is that God's dealings with Noah after the Flood indicate that it was worldwide. The authors do offer an interpretation of the Noahic covenant, which is true as far as it goes. They say it highlights God's continued grace toward sinful creatures (p. 103). It represents God's commitment "to the continuance of the world and its inhabitants" (p. 104). It indicates "a re-establishment of" and "greater permanence to the cosmos's order" (p. 120). Okay. Fine. Good. But there's more.

God's promise was not merely that He would now preserve the world, it was that He would not repeat such a Flood (figure 1). He said, "never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Genesis 9:11; cf. 8:21; 9:15; Isaiah 54:9). But what was God promising not to repeat in Longman



Figure 1. God's covenant to never flood the world again was made not only with Noah, but "all future generations" (Genesis 9:12). This implies that the worldwide Flood occurred in the real past and was not merely a literary device.

and Walton's view? Although they don't say, I suspect they would agree that God was promising not to send another worldwide Flood. But this means, in their view, that even this promise must be part of the hyperbole. In other words, it's not part of the inspired meaning we can derive from the account; it's just part of the furniture of the literary device meant to emphasize God's gracious commitment to preserve the world. On the contrary, the text explicitly says that God was making this covenant not only with the characters in the narrative—Noah, his family, and the animals—but also with their future “offspring” (Genesis 9:9) and “for all future generations” (Genesis 9:12). God promised *us* that He would never flood the entire world again, which means He once did so in real history.

Survivors outside the Ark?

As mentioned earlier, Longman and Walton admit that the Flood narrative describes the reduction of the world's population down to eight. But they do not believe this really happened in history. They say it is only “one reading of the story” which understands Noah and sons “to be the ancestors of everyone who is alive today” (p. 162). Plus, given their acceptance of the conventional millions-of-years age of the earth, “there was no time when all humans were concentrated in a specific area so that even an extensive, regional flood could wipe them all out” (p. 46). Therefore, in their view, many others besides those on the Ark survived the actual, historical flood.

But this is contrary to the text. The Bible emphasizes in a variety of ways that only Noah and his family remained after the Flood. These simply cannot all be chalked up to the aggrandizing of the Flood's significance. For example, Noah and sons were commanded to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1; cf. 9:7)—the

same command God gave to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28) because Noah was likewise beginning from scratch. Also, Noah's sons gave rise to the “nations” (*goyim*), which spread around the “whole earth” following the Flood (Genesis 9:19; 10:32). Finally, the New Testament treats it as a given that God “did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah ... with seven others” (2 Peter 2:5; cf. 1 Peter 3:20). So, the notion that the Flood destroyed everyone extends well beyond the immediate context of the Flood account. It is treated as a factual, historical truth in all that follows.

Peter's perspective

Longman and Walton say that the New Testament references to the Flood treat it as merely “an illustration of the truth that our God is a God who judges sin” (p. 98). Supposedly, they are not making any claims about the historical extent of the Flood. But this is dubious, especially when it comes to the Apostle Peter's second epistle. In chapter 2, Peter discusses a chronological series of God's judgments: the pre-Flood angels, the Flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2:4–8). Here, Peter treats the Flood as an event of history, just like these others. All three serve as examples for people today precisely because God really did execute these judgments in history. So, when Peter says that God “did not spare the ancient world” (2 Peter 2:5), he is not implicitly thinking, “as the story goes”. He means to say that God actually destroyed the ancient world.

But was he thinking of the ‘world’ in a restricted sense—referring to only part of the earth? No. In the very next chapter, Peter brings up the Flood again. There, he sets up a contrast between the pre-Flood “world that then existed” which was destroyed by water, and “the heavens and earth that now exist” which will be judged by fire (2 Peter 3:6–7). Clearly, the present heavens and earth is universal.

But then the comparison indicates that the extent of the pre-Flood world, which “was deluged with water and perished”, is also universal. Peter plainly thought the Flood engulfed the entire world, not just a part of it. Sadly, however, Longman and Walton never even mention this passage, let alone offer a response.

Conclusion

Walton's ‘Lost World’ books offer such a radical rethink of the biblical text that one wonders how the church could have gotten it so wrong for so long. But, when the arguments are evaluated and considered in light of Scripture, it turns out it is not the church that is wrong. Longman and Walton may be clever scholars who offer some helpful insights but, in the end, their reinterpretation of Noah's Flood doesn't hold water.

References

1. Statham, D., Dubious and dangerous exposition: a review of *The Lost World of Genesis One* by John H. Walton, *J. Creation* 24(3):24–26, 2010; creation.com/genlostworld.
2. Halley, K., John Walton reimagines Adam and Eve: a review of *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* by John H. Walton, *J. Creation* 29(2):47–51, 2015; creation.com/walton.
3. I will say, though, that in Moshier's chapter on the geological evidence, his straw men don't inspire confidence. He wrongly assumes the Flood water had to cover Mt Ararat at its present height, and that Noah landed in the same place he lived before the Flood (p. 153).
4. Confusingly, Longman and Walton seem to contradict themselves when they say the biblical text is “vague about human survivors” (p. 71). I take them to mean that the text is vague about the reality, though clear in the hyperbolic presentation that none survived.
5. Sarfati, J., Genesis: Bible authors believed it to be history, *Creation* 28(2):21–23, March 2006.
6. bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html
7. Longman and Walton say the Ark's “dimensions are impractical” (p. 75) and are given to emphasize its importance, not its “actual size” (p. 76). They claim that seaworthy wooden boats have never been and cannot be built so large (pp. 39–40). However, they have not done their homework on wooden ships of antiquity. See Pierce, L., The large ships of antiquity, *Creation* 22(3):46–48, June 2000, and Nunn, W., Amazing ancient Chinese treasure ships, *Creation* 37(1):12–13, January 2015.