Many Floods, Many Tellings

What the world's flood stories share, where they differ, and what scholars think about why

How Many Stories?

You may have heard that there are more than two hundred flood stories in the world, or more than five hundred. Those numbers are repeated everywhere, but we could not trace either one to a scholar who actually counted. The first big collection, by the German geographer Richard Andree in 1891, gathered about eighty-eight. The Scottish scholar James Frazer added many more in 1918. The true number depends on what you count: a story told in ten villages, or written down by five travellers, can be one story or fifteen.

What the collectors found matters more than the count. Frazer noticed that flood stories are common in the Near East, India, south-east Asia, the Pacific islands and above all the Americas; rarer in Europe; and, in his view, almost missing from Africa and from northern and eastern Asia. Later collectors have found more in Africa than he did, but they are still rare there, and often about creation rather than punishment.

This folder holds thirty-one stories from every inhabited continent. We chose ones that are old, well recorded, and different from each other, and we left out some popular ones because we could not trace them to a trustworthy source. Each book says who told the story, who wrote it down, and when.

THINK IT THROUGH

Why do you think a big round number like "five hundred" spreads so easily, even when nobody can say where it came from?

What They Share

Set side by side, many of these stories have a family likeness. Water covers the world, or the world as the tellers knew it. Most living things die. A few survive, often warned ahead of time. They escape in a boat, a chest, a log, a jar, a tree, or on a mountain. When the water goes down, the world begins again, and the survivors become the ancestors of the people telling the story.

Many stories also share the feeling that the flood is about the relationship between people and whatever made them. In story after story the people have forgotten, quarrelled, grown proud, become violent, or failed to give thanks: in Genesis, in Greece, among the Anishinaabe, the K'iche' Maya and the Mapuche, among others.

THINK IT THROUGH

If people far apart tell a story with the same shape, what are some of the reasons that could explain it?

Where They Differ

Why the flood comes. In Genesis it is human violence, and God is grieved. In the Babylonian *Atrahasis* it is human noise and a god who wants to sleep. In the Tlingit story it is a family quarrel. In the Aztec teaching an age of the world simply ends. In India's oldest telling no reason is given. For the Mande of Mali the flood is part of how the world was put in order.

Who is saved, and why. Noah is chosen because he is righteous. Manu is saved because he was kind to a small fish. Utnapishtim is saved because one god went behind the backs of the others. Raven saves himself by cleverness. Among the K'iche' Maya, no one is saved at all.

The vessel. Huge boats built to measure in Mesopotamia and Israel; a chest in Greece; a sealed clay jar among the Pima; a hollow cypress among the Aztecs; a log for Nanabozho; and in the Andes and Chile, no boat at all, but a hill or mountain that rises with the water.

What comes after. A covenant and a rainbow; a survivor made immortal; a new people from thrown stones; a couple turned into dogs; a new earth grown from a pawful of mud on a turtle's back.

These differences are where each people's picture of the world shows through. A story about a flood is also a story about what the tellers believed about the gods, about right and wrong, and about what human beings are for.

THINK IT THROUGH

Which difference between the stories surprised you most, and what does it tell you about the people who told it?

Mesopotamia and Genesis

In December 1872 George Smith, a self-taught young scholar at the British Museum, announced that he had found a flood story on a clay tablet from Nineveh. It was Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and its likeness to Genesis caused a sensation. A man is warned and builds a great boat; it comes to rest on a mountain; birds are sent out to find dry land; the survivor makes an offering, and the divine is pleased by its smell.

The differences are just as real. Mesopotamia has many gods who disagree; Genesis has one. The Babylonian gods give no moral reason, or a petty one; in Genesis the reason is moral. In *Gilgamesh* the survivor is made immortal; Noah is not. Genesis ends with a covenant made with every living creature.

Most scholars think the Genesis story draws on, or shares, a tradition older than itself, since the Mesopotamian copies are older than the earliest likely date for Genesis. Some think both come from a common older tradition of the region. Many Jewish and Christian readers see the shared material as memory of a real event, with Genesis telling it truthfully and with its moral meaning restored. Historians cannot settle that last question from the tablets alone.

THINK IT THROUGH

Two stories can share many details and still mean very different things. Which matters more to you: the details, or the meaning?

Real Floods, Remembered

One explanation is simple: people who live by rivers and seas know floods. In 1929 the archaeologist Leonard Woolley dug at Ur, in southern Iraq, found a thick layer of clean flood silt, and announced he had found the flood of Genesis. Later work found flood layers at other Mesopotamian cities too, but from different centuries, and none at some cities nearby. So no single flood covered the region. Rivers that flooded often may be enough to explain why the stories began there.

Elsewhere, Frazer thought some Pacific stories sounded like memories of earthquakes and great sea waves, and several of the Pacific stories in this folder are about the sea rising rather than rain falling. In China, a team of scientists argued in 2016 that a real flood on the Yellow River around 1920 BC lies behind the story of Yu; other scientists dispute their dating.

The End of the Ice Age

Some explanations reach much further back. At the height of the last Ice Age, so much water was locked in ice that the seas were about 120 metres lower than today. As the ice melted, the seas rose, until about seven thousand years ago. Whole coastlines, and the people who lived on them, had to move inland.

The geographers Patrick Nunn and Nicholas Reid studied Aboriginal Australian stories of land lost to the sea and argued in 2016 that some of them may be memories of that rise, passed down for more than seven thousand years. Others think that is too long for a memory to last, and the debate goes on.

A famous idea from 1997 said that the Black Sea filled suddenly and catastrophically about 7,600 years ago, and that this could lie behind the stories of the Near East. Later research found a much smaller rise than first claimed. In northern Europe, a land now called Doggerland, joining Britain to the continent, was drowned between about ten thousand and seven thousand years ago. Nobody knows whether any story remembers it.

THINK IT THROUGH

Could a story really be passed down for thousands of years? What would it take for that to happen?

Shared Ancestry or Borrowing

Another explanation is that stories travel. Peoples who are related, or who meet, pass stories along, and they change as they go. The Harvard scholar Michael Witzel has argued that the flood story belongs to a very ancient family of myths carried across Eurasia and into the Americas, and is mostly missing where that family did not reach. His reviewers have found the idea interesting but the evidence thin. The French researcher Julien d'Huy has traced flood motifs with the methods biologists use for family trees, and says his results show only broad trends.

Some patterns clearly did travel. The earth-diver, in which an animal brings up mud from the bottom of the water to make new land, is found right across North America and northern Asia. Andree himself, back in 1891, still thought most flood stories began independently, where they were found.

Who Wrote It Down

Most of these stories were told aloud for centuries before an outsider wrote them down: a missionary, a soldier, a Spanish official, an anthropologist. That matters. Sometimes the people telling a story had already heard the Bible, and wove parts of it in. Sometimes the person writing hoped to find Noah, and heard what they hoped to hear.

Frazer thought the Maasai story of Tumbainot, with its ark and rainbow, was plainly the Bible story retold, and its recorder had his own theory about Maasai origins. A flood story from the Mkulwe people of south-western Tanzania was written down by a missionary, Alfons Hamberger, in 1909, at a mission station. The scholar Martha Beckwith judged that the Hawaiian story of Nuʻu had been reshaped on the biblical pattern, while an older Hawaiian flood story was genuine. John Swanton, recording Tlingit stories, marked one detail as a Christian addition. The Spanish who wrote down Andean stories were eager to match them to Genesis. And two stories still often quoted, a Welsh one and a Lithuanian one, are now thought to have been made up or heavily reworked by nineteenth-century writers; we left them out.

But there is an opposite mistake too. It would be unfair to assume that any story which reminds us of Genesis must have been copied from it. Peoples can arrive at similar stories on their own, and some of the Indigenous stories here were recorded by people who took great care to tell old from new.

THINK IT THROUGH

If you were writing down an elder's story, how would you make sure you were recording what they said and not what you expected?

How People Read Them

For the Jewish tradition, the story of Noah is above all about moral responsibility. A rabbi writing on the weekly reading of Noah points out that, unlike the Babylonian gods, the God of Genesis does not act on a whim: the flood answers human violence and corruption, and Noah is saved because he is righteous. The story ends with God binding himself by a promise.

Christians have read the flood in several ways. Some read it as a record of a real event across the whole earth; many read it as a real event, perhaps regional, told with theological purpose; others read it mainly for its meaning. Early Christian writers saw the ark as a picture of rescue and new beginning, and the New Testament links the waters of the flood with baptism (1 Peter 3:20–21).

C. S. Lewis, in his essay “Myth Became Fact” (collected in *God in the Dock*), suggested that the great myths of the world were not simply mistakes. He thought they could carry real glimpses of truth, and that Christians need not be embarrassed when they find echoes of their faith in older stories. His idea was that what the myths had dimly pictured, Christianity claims really happened.

Others read the flood stories as human attempts to make sense of disaster, guilt and survival, with no claim about history at all. You will meet thoughtful people who hold each of these views.

THINK IT THROUGH

When you notice that many peoples tell a similar story, does that make it seem more true to you, or less? Why?

Look Back

You have now seen floods sent by one God and by many, by a monster, by a grandfather, by a child's tears and by the turning of the ages. You have seen people saved for their goodness, their kindness, their cleverness, or not saved at all. And you have seen how much depends on who told the story, and who wrote it down.

Some questions to carry with you. Which story stayed with you most, and why? What do the different reasons for the flood tell you about what each people believed was wrong with the world? And what do the different endings, a promise, a new earth, a punishment, a riddle, say about what they hoped for?

These stories were never meant to be read alone in a book. They were told by grandparents, elders, priests and storytellers to people gathered close. If you want to go further, ask someone. Ask your family what stories they were raised on. Talk with a pastor, a rabbi or a teacher about how they read Genesis. Visit a museum, a cultural centre, or a tribal or First Nations heritage centre near you, and listen to people tell their own stories in their own words.

THINK IT THROUGH

Who could you ask this week to tell you a story that matters to them?

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Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.