

Deluge

Deluge is the name of a catastrophe fully described in Gen., vi, 1-ix, 19, and referred to in the following passages of Sacred Scripture: Wisd., x, 4; xiv, 6-7; Ecclus., xvi, 8, xliv, 17-19; Is., liv, 9; Matt., xxiv, 37-39; Luke, xvii, 26-27; Hebr., xi, 7; I Peter, iii, 20-21; II Peter, ii, 5. In the present article we shall consider:

- I. The Biblical Account;
- II. Its Historicity;
- III. The Universality of the Flood;
- IV. Collateral Questions.

I. BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DELUGE

The Book of Genesis gives the following brief account of the Deluge: **God** sees the wickedness of men, and determines to destroy them excepting Noe and his family (vi, 1-8). He reveals his decree to Noe and instructs him how he may save himself and the seed of all animal life by means of an ark to be built according to certain dimensions (vi, 9-22). Seven days before the Flood, **God** commands the patriarch to enter the ark (vii, 1-5). Noe completes his entrance into the ark on the very day on which the Flood begins; the rain falls for forty days and nights; all living things outside the ark are destroyed; the waters prevail upon the earth a hundred and fifty days (vii, 6-24). The waters decrease, the earth dries up; Noe ascertains its condition by means of a raven and a dove sent out from the ark (viii, 1-14). Noe obeys the Divine command to leave the ark, builds an altar, offers sacrifice, makes a covenant with **God**, and begins to be a husbandman (ix, 1-27).

Simple as this account seems to be, the Biblical critics maintain that it is a mosaic made up of two Flood stories, differing in authorship and in contents. They assign one to the Yahwistic writer usually designated by the letter J; the other, to the post-exilic priestly writer generally known as P. According to Kautzsch, the sections vi, 1-8; vii, 1-5, 7-10, 12, 16b-17, 22-23; viii, 2b-3a, 6-12, 13b, 20-22; ix, 18-27, belong to J, while P claims vi, 9-22; vii, 6, 11, 13-16a, 18-21; vii, 24-viii, 2a; viii, 3b-5, 13a, 14-19; ix, 1-17. This division of the text is based on the following grounds:

1. J uses the divine name Yahweh, P employs Elohim;
2. J and P narrate the same series of events;
3. J and P differ in language;
4. J and P disagree in their statements.

The composite character of the Flood story does not conflict with its Mosaic authorship. The most conservative Bible student will grant that Moses was not an eye-witness of the Deluge. Preceding from Divine revelation, he must have derived his information about the event either from tradition or from written documents. If Biblical criticism has

succeeded in restoring the main sources utilized by Moses in his history of the Flood, it has rendered a most signal service to exegesis. Happily we are in the position to be able to control the value of the critical conclusions by means of the Babylonian or Akkadian account of the Deluge. Without delaying over its form as contained in the fragments of Berosus which are of comparatively recent date, we find that the version given in a cuneiform inscription on tablets preserved in the British Museum, and first deciphered by George Smith in 1872, contains a combination of the P and J elements of the Flood story. This version is said by experts to date back at least to about 3000 B. C. It is certain, therefore, that the so-called P and J documents reconstructed by the critics were combined long before the Biblical text was put in writing. This fact is confirmed by a Deluge story contained in Scheil's recently discovered fragment, which cannot be dated much later than 2140 B. C. Critics can no longer deny the existence of a Flood tradition similar to the history contained in the Book of Genesis, antedating our Biblical account. In order to uphold their division of the inspired text into the so-called J and P documents, they maintain that the Akkadian story was copied partially in the J and partially in the P documents, and that the Biblical "Redactor" reunited these two partial accounts into one. This series of assumptions, however, is at best an awkward attempt to explain away a fact which stands in the way of their theory. But we are prepared to admit the critical division of the Flood account in spite of its disagreement with the results of recent discoveries, if the critical arguments are really cogent.

(1) We are told the J uses the Divine name Yahweh, while P employs Elohim. But the following considerations must be kept in mind: First, we are hardly sufficiently sure of the use of the Divine names in the primitive inspired text to build a solid argument on their occurrence in the present text-form. Secondly, in the present text-form Elohim occurs twice in the Yahwistic document, vi, 2, and vii, 9. Thirdly, six passages in the section vii, 16-viii, 20, are assigned to the Yahwistic writer, though the name Yahweh does not occur once. Fourthly, the variation of the Divine names in the Deluge story can be explained satisfactorily without resorting to the violent measure of dividing up the text between two distinct writers.

(2) It is alleged that J and P report the same events. If we examine the two documents as reconstructed by the critics, in the light of this contention, we find that they are fragmentary and that they do not contain two series of events. J passes from **God's** determination to destroy the world (vi, 1-8) to the Divine command that Noe should enter the ark without telling him where to find or how to procure an ark (vii, 1-5). Noe builds an altar and offers burnt offerings without leaving the ark (viii, 20). P does not inform us of the real nature of the corruption of all flesh (vi, 9-12); he knows of **God's** order to save the animals, but knows nothing of **God's** command concerning Noe and his family (vi, 17-22; vii, 13); even eleven months after the beginning of the Flood and two months after the appearance of the tops of the mountains, he knows of no attempt on the part of Noe to ascertain the condition of the earth (viii, 13 sq.); finally, he gives no ethical motive for the Divine blessing bestowed on Noe (ix, 1, sq.). The critics are aware of these gaps in the two documents, and explain them by supposing that the "Redactor", who had the original Flood stories before him, did not insert their complete text into the Biblical account. But if the "Redactor" omitted certain parts of the original documents in order to

avoid repetitions, why did he not omit the repetitions discovered by the critics? Or are we to assume that he introduced certain repetitions, while he carefully avoided others? Is it not more likely that he considered the repetitions alleged by the critics as mere rhetorical devices, as recapitulatory transitions, e. g. (vi, 9-12). or gradations (vii, 17-20; vii, 21-23), or amplifications (vii, 7, 13-16a)?

(3) J and P are said to differ in language; but the critical division being what it is, it would be strange if the two documents did not differ in language. The sections which contain chronological, systematic, and scientific material are attributed to P, the rest is left to J. Is it surprising that J does not describe the measurements of the ark, seeing that the critics do not give him any ark to describe? Or is it remarkable that P lacks the poetic style found in J's description of the raven and the dove, seeing that no section is assigned to him, which would admit such a treatment? The care with which only set subjects and determined expressions are assigned to J and P respectively is well illustrated by the fact that in spite of their minute dissection of the Flood story, the critics must remove part of vi, 7; vii, 3, 7, 17, 22, 23; ix, 18, 22, 23, 26; and the whole of vii, 8, 9, from the J document, and part of vi, 17; vii, 6; ix, 4, from the P document, in order not to allow inconsistencies in their sources.

(4) Finally, J and P are said to disagree with regard to the animals to be taken into the ark, as to the duration of the flood, and as to **God's** behaviour towards man after the Flood. In vi, 19, indeed, P records **God's** command, "thou shalt bring two of a sort into the ark"; but is it inconsistent with this, if 120 years later, when Noe is about to enter the ark, J relates the more accurate Divine specification, "of all clean beasts take seven and seven ... but of the beasts that are not clean two and two" (vii, 2, 3)? It cannot be said that the fulfilment shows that only two of every kind were taken into the ark; both vii 9 and vii, 15, 16, read "two and two... male and female", so that they express couples fit for generation rather than any absolute number. The discrepancy as to chronology between J and P is more artificial than true; there is no inconsistency in the chronology of the Biblical account of the Flood, so that the discrepancy between the documents, if there be one, is of critical manufacture. Besides, a simple reading of the J document taken separately will show that its chronology is not satisfactory. Finally, if in ix, 15, P knows of a Divine covenant which according to J is the result of the self-deliberation of Yahweh in consequence of the patriarch's sacrifice (viii, 21-22), the two documents are rather supplementary than contradictory; J supplies the ethical motive for **God's** action as described by P.

II. HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLICAL DELUGE ACCOUNT

It has been contended that the Flood story of the Bible and the Flood legends of other peoples, looked at from a merely historical point of view, stand on a similar footing, the Biblical account being a mere late variant of one of them. And on inquiring into their origin, we find that four theories have been advanced:

1. The Flood story is a mere product of fancy. This theory contradicts the analogy of similar legends among all peoples.
2. The Deluge story is by others considered as a nature-myth, representing the phenomena of winter, which in Babylonia especially is the time of rain. This nature-myth again is by some writers believed to have grown out of an archaic ether-myth, according to which the sun was imagined as a man voyaging on a boat in the heavenly ocean. The fact that the sea was to be found on the earth, not in heaven, and the damage wrought by the incessant winter-rain and the inundation of great rivers, transferred the myth from heaven to earth, changing the ether-myth into a nature-myth. But this theory, too, neglects the numerous Flood stories existing among many nations, which do not lend themselves to a similar explanation.
3. Connected with the preceding theory is the explanation which makes the Deluge story a **cosmogonic** fable. It has been seen that the hero rescued in the ship must have been the sun-god (cf. the ether-myth). Thus the Deluge becomes ultimately a variant of the Babylonian creation-myth. It is for this reason that the mythological text published by Peiser calls the time of the Deluge "the year of the great serpent". For this "great serpent" is the personified ocean which on old Babylonian maps encircles Babylonia, just as leviathan is the world-encircling ocean personified as a serpent; it is the same monster which is a central figure in the Creation story. We need not add that this theory too leaves the great bulk of the existing Flood traditions unexplained.
4. It has been inferred from the improbability of the preceding theories, that the Flood story must be a poetical or legendary presentation of some natural occurrence. Furthermore, it is maintained that the immediate basis of the legend is a local disturbance. It may have been a great inundation caused by an overflow of the Tigris and Euphrates, or the incursion of a tidal wave resulting from an earthquake south of the mouth of the two rivers. But however terrible the ruin wrought by such inundations may be, this theory does not account for the universality of the Flood tradition, unless we suppose that the ruin affected the ancestors of all human races.

Thus far we have considered the Biblical Flood story from a merely historical point of view. But the student who believes in the inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures and admits the value of tradition in their exegesis can hardly rest satisfied with the results thus far obtained. It will not even be enough to grant that the ancient Flood legend became the vehicle of religious and spiritual truth by means of a divinely guided religious feeling and insight of the inspired writer. The Deluge is referred to in several passages of Scripture as a historical fact; the writings of the Fathers consider the event in the same light, and this view of the subject is confirmed by the numerous variants under which the Flood tradition lives in the most distant nations of the earth.

(a) The following are some of the New Testament passages which imply that the Deluge was a real historical event: "And as in the days of Noe, so shall also the coming of the **Son of man** be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, even till that day in which Noe entered into the ark, and

they knew not. till the flood came, and took them all away; so also shall the coming of the [Son of man](#) be" ([Matthew 24:37-39](#)). In these words Christ regards the Flood with its circumstances as being not less real than the last days will be of which He speaks in the passage. The same view concerning the Flood, Christ implies in Luke, xvii, 26-27. In the Epistle to the Hebrews (xi, 7) the inspired writer is not less clear about the historicity of the Flood: "By faith, Noe having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world; and was instituted heir of the justice which is by faith." St. Peter ([1 Peter 3:20](#)) too refers to the ark and the Flood as historical facts: "When they waited for the patience of [God](#) in the days of Noe, when the ark was a building: wherein a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water". He returns to the same teaching in II Peter, ii, 5. We might appeal to Is., liv, 9; Nah., i, 8; Ezech., xiv, 14; *Ecclus.*, xliv, 18 sq.; Ps. xxviii, 10; xxxi, 6; but what has been said sufficiently shows that the Bible urges the historicity of the Deluge story.

(b) As to the view of [Christian tradition](#), it suffices to appeal here to the words of Father Zorell who maintains that the Bible story concerning the Flood has never been explained or understood in any but a truly historical sense by any Catholic writer (cf. Hagen, *Lexicon Biblicum*). It would be useless labour and would exceed the scope of the present article to enumerate the long list of Fathers and Scholastic theologians who have touched upon the question. The few stray discordant voices belonging to the last fifteen or twenty years are simply drowned in this unanimous chorus of [Christian tradition](#).

(c) The historicity of the Biblical Flood account is confirmed by the tradition existing in all places and at all times as to the occurrence of a similar catastrophe. F. von Schwarz (*Sintfluth und Völkerwanderungen*, pp. 8-18) enumerates sixty-three such Flood stories which are in his opinion independent of the Biblical account. R. Andree (*Die Flutsagen ethnographisch betrachtet*) discusses eighty-eight different Flood stories, and considers sixty-two of them as independent of the Chaldee and Hebrew tradition. Moreover, these stories extend through all the races of the earth excepting the African; these are excepted, not because it is certain that they do not possess any Flood traditions, but because their traditions have not as yet been sufficiently investigated. Lenormant pronounces the Flood story as the most universal tradition in the history of primitive man, and Franz Delitzsch was of opinion that we might as well consider the history of Alexander the Great a myth, as to call the Flood tradition a fable. It would, indeed, be a greater [miracle](#) than that of the Deluge itself, if the various and different conditions surrounding the several nations of the earth had produced among them a tradition substantially identical. Opposite causes would have produced the same effect.

III. UNIVERSALITY OF THE DELUGE

The Biblical account ascribes some kind of a universality to the Flood. But it may have been geographically universal, or it may have been only anthropologically universal. In other words, the Flood may have covered the whole earth, or it may have destroyed all men, covering only a certain part of the earth. Till about the seventeenth century, it was generally believed that the Deluge had been geographically universal, and this opinion is

defended even in our days by some conservative scholars (cf. Kaulen in Kirchenlexikon). But two hundred years of theological and scientific study devoted to the question have thrown so much light on it that we may now defend the following conclusions:

(1) The geographical universality of the Deluge may be safely abandoned.

Neither Sacred Scripture nor universal ecclesiastical tradition, nor again scientific considerations, render it advisable to adhere to the opinion that the Flood covered the whole surface of the earth.

(a) The words of the original text, rendered "earth" in our version, signify "land" as well as "earth"; in fact, "land" appears to have been their primary meaning, and this meaning fits in admirably with Gen., iv, v, and Gen., x; why not adhere to this meaning also in Gen., vi-ix, or the Flood story. Why not read, the waters "filled all on the face of the land", "all flesh was destroyed that moved in the land", "all things wherein there is the breath of life in the land died", "all the high mountains under the whole heaven (corresponding to the land) were covered"? The primary meaning of the inspired text urges therefore a universality of the flood covering the whole land or region in which Noe lived, but not the whole earth.

(b) As to the cogency of the proof from tradition for the geographical universality of the Flood, it must be remembered that very few of the Fathers touched upon this question *ex professo*. Among those who do so there are some who restrict the Deluge to certain parts of the earth's surface without incurring the blame of offending against tradition.

- The earthly paradise, e.g., was exempted by many, irrespective of its location on the top of a high mountain or elsewhere;
- the same must be said of the place in which Mathusala must have lived during the Flood according to the Septuagint reading;
- St. Augustine knows of writers who exempted the mountain Olympus from the Flood, though he himself does not agree with them;
- Pseudo-Justin hesitatingly rejects the opinion of those who restrict the Flood to the parts of the earth actually inhabited by men;
- Cajetan revived the opinion that the Flood did not cover Olympus and other high mountains, believing that Genesis spoke only of the mountains under the aerial heaven;
- Tostatus sees a figure of speech in the expression of the Bible which implies the universality of the Flood; at any rate, he exempts the earthly Paradise from the Deluge, since Henoch had to be saved.

If the Fathers had considered the universality of the Flood as part of the body of ecclesiastical tradition, or of the deposit of faith, they would have defended it more vigorously. It is true that the Congregation of the Index condemned Vossius's treatise "De Septuaginta Interpretibus" in which he defended, among other doctrines, the view that the Flood covered only the inhabited part of the earth; but theologians of great weight

maintained that the work was condemned on account of its [Protestant](#) author, and not on account of its doctrine.

(c) There are also certain scientific considerations which oppose the view that the Flood was geographically universal. Not that science opposes any difficulty insuperable to the power of [God](#); but it draws attention to a number of most extraordinary, if not [miraculous](#) phenomena involved in the admission of a geographically universal Deluge.

- First, no such geological traces can be found as ought to have been left by a universal Deluge; for the catastrophe connected with the beginning of the ice-age, or the geological deluge, must not be connected with the Biblical.
- Secondly, the amount of water required by a universal Deluge, as described in the Bible, cannot be accounted for by the data furnished in the Biblical account. If the surface of the earth, in round numbers, amounts to 510,000,000 square kilometres, and if the elevation of the highest mountains reaches about 9000 metres, the water required by the Biblical Flood, if it be universal, amounts to about 4,600,000,000 cubic kilometres. Now, a forty days' rain, ten times more copious than the most violent rainfall known to us, will raise the level of the sea only about 800 metres; since the height to be attained is about 9000 metres, there is still a gap to be filled by unknown sources amounting to a height of more than 8000 metres, in order to raise the water to the level of the greatest mountains.
- Thirdly, if the Biblical Deluge was geographically universal, the sea water and the fresh water would mix to such an extent that neither the marine animals nor the fresh-water animals could have lived in the mixture without a [miracle](#).
- Fourthly, there are serious difficulties connected with the animals in the ark, if the Flood was geographically universal: How were they brought to Noe from the remote regions of the earth in which they lived? How could eight persons take care of such an array of beasts? Where did they obtain the food necessary for all the animals? How could the arctic animals live with those of the torrid zone for a whole year and under the same roof?

No Catholic commentator will repudiate an explanation merely for fear of having to admit a [miracle](#); but no Catholic has a right to admit Biblical [miracles](#) which are not well attested either by Scripture or tradition. What is more, there are traces in the Biblical Flood story which favour a limited extent of the catastrophe: Noe could have known the geographical universality of the Deluge only by revelation; still the Biblical account appears to have been written by an eye-witness. If the Flood had been universal, the water would have had to fall from the height of the mountains in India to the level of those in Armenia on which the ark rested, i.e. about 11,500 feet, within the space of a few days. The fact that the dove is said to have found "the waters . . . upon the whole earth", and that Noe "saw that the face of the earth was dried", leaves the impression that the inspired writer uses the word "earth" in the restricted sense of "land". Attention has been drawn also to the "bough of an olive tree, with green leaves" carried by the dove in her mouth on her second return to the ark.

(2) The Deluge must have been anthropologically universal, i.e. it must have destroyed the whole human race.

After limiting the extent of the Flood to a part of the earth, we naturally ask whether any men lived outside the region covered by its waters. It has been maintained that not all men can have perished in the Flood for the following reasons: Tribes which certainly sprang from Noe were preceded in their earliest settlements by other tribes whose origin is unknown to us: the Dravidic tribes preceded the Aryans in India; the proto-Medians preceded the Medians; the Akkadians preceded the Cushites and Semites in Chaldea; the Chanaanites were preceded in Palestine by other races. Besides, the oldest Egyptian monuments present the Negro race just as we find it to-day, so that even at that remote age, it was wholly different from the Caucasian race. Again, the languages of the races springing from Noe are said to be in a state of development different from that in which we find the languages of the peoples of unknown origin. Finally, the Biblical account of the Flood is said to admit a restriction of its anthropological universality as readily as a limitation of its geographical completeness; for if "land" be substituted in our translation for earth, the Book of Genesis speaks only of the men inhabiting a certain district, and not of the men of the whole earth, as being the victims of the waters. Considerations like these have induced several Catholic writers to regard as quite tenable the opinion that the Deluge did not destroy all men outside the ark.

But if the reason advanced for limiting the Flood to a certain part of the human race be duly examined, they are found to be more specious than true. The above scientific arguments do not favour a partial destruction of the human race absolutely, but only in so far as the uninterrupted existence of the various races in question gives them more time for the racial development and the historical data that have to be harmonized with the text of Genesis. Those who urge these arguments grant, therefore, implicitly that the allowance of a proper length of time will explain the facts on which their arguments are based. As there is nothing in the teaching of the Bible preventing us from assigning the Flood to a much earlier date than has usually been done, the difficulties urged on the part of science against the anthropological universality of the Flood may be easily evaded. Nor can the distribution of the nations as described in the tenth chapter of Genesis be appealed to, seeing that this section does not enumerate all races of the earth, but confines itself probably to the Caucasian.

Science, therefore, may demand an early date for the Deluge, but it does not necessitate a limitation of the Flood to certain parts of the human race. The question, whether all men perished in the Deluge, must be decided by the teaching of the Bible, and of its authoritative interpreter. As to the teachings of the Bible, the passage which deals *ex professo* with the Flood ([Genesis 6-9](#)), if taken by itself, may be interpreted of a partial destruction of man; it insists on the fact that all inhabitants of the "land", not of the "earth", died in the waters of the Deluge, and it does not explicitly tell us whether all men lived in the "land". It may also be granted, that of the passages which refer incidentally to the flood, Wis., x, 4; xiv, 6; Eccles., xlv, 17 sqq., and Matt., xxiv, 37 sqq., may be explained, more or less satisfactorily, of a partial destruction of the human race by the inundation of the Deluge; but no one can deny that the *prima facie* meaning of I Peter, iii,

20 sq., II Peter, ii, 4-9, and II Peter, iii, 5 sqq., refers to the death of all men not contained in the ark. The explanations of these passages, offered by the opponents of the anthropological universality of the Deluge, are hardly sufficient to remove all reasonable doubt. We turn, therefore, to authority in order to arrive at a final settlement of the question. Here we are confronted, in brief, with the following facts: Up to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the belief in the anthropological universality of the Deluge was general. Moreover, the Fathers regarded the ark and the Flood as types of baptism and of the Church; this view they entertained not as a private opinion, but as a development of the doctrine contained in I Peter, iii, 20 sq. Hence, the typical character of both ark and Flood belongs to the "matters of faith and morals" in which the [Tridentine](#) and the Vatican Councils oblige all Catholics to follow the interpretation of the Church.

IV. COLLATERAL QUESTIONS

These may be reduced to the time of the Deluge, its place, and its natural causes.

(1) Time of the Deluge

Genesis places the Deluge in the six-hundredth year of Noe; the Masoretic text assigns it to the year 1656 after the creation, the Samaritan to 1307, the Septuagint to 2242, [Flavius Josephus](#) to 2256. Again, the Masoretic text places it in B.C. 2350 (Klaproth) or 2253 (Lüken), the Samaritan in 2903, the Septuagint in 3134. According to the ancient traditions (Lüken), the Assyrians placed the Deluge in 2234 B.C. or 2316, the Greeks in 2300, the Egyptians in 2600, the Phoenicians in 2700, the Mexicans in 2900, the Indians in 3100, the Chinese in 2297, while the Armenians assigned the building of the Tower of Babel to about 2200 B.C. But as we have seen, we must be prepared to assign earlier dates to these events.

(2) Place of the Flood

The Bible teaches only that the ark rested on a mountain in Armenia. Hence the Flood must have occurred in a place whence the ark could be carried towards this mountain. The Babylonian tradition places the Deluge in the lower valley of the Tigris and Euphrates.

(3) Natural Causes of the Flood

Scripture assigns as the causes of the Deluge the heavy forty days' rains, the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep, and the opening of the flood-gates of heaven. This does not exclude the opinion that certain natural forces were at play in the catastrophe. It has been suggested that the axis of the earth was shifted on account of the earth's collision with a comet, or that powerful volcanic eruptions raised new mountains in the sea, or that an earthquake caused a tidal wave to overrun certain portions of the dry land. Thus, Süß speaks of the frequency of earthquakes and of storms in the Gulf of Persia; but this would enclose the Flood within too narrow limits both of space and of time. Another conjecture has been proposed by von Schwartz. He supposes that an inland Mongolian sea, in size

about equal to the Mediterranean, situated at a height of about 6000 feet above the level of the ocean and 5000 feet above the surrounding Aralo-Caspian plain, at the time of an earthquake broke through one of its walls, and sent its 3,000,000 cubic kilometres of water into the region north of Persia, Armenia, and the Caucasus, covering the whole plain, until the waters were drained by way of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean into the Atlantic Ocean. Here we have the breaking of the bonds of the great deep, we have an outflow of water lasting for several months, and we find that the ark must have been carried westward by the general drift of the waters till it rested on the mountains of Armenia. But not to mention the improbability of the supposition urged by several scientists, we do not understand why the tops of the mountains should not have been visible even after the mooring of the ark. A number of other hypotheses have been proposed in order to explain by natural causes the phenomena implied in the Biblical account of the Deluge, but thus far they have not satisfied the various details given in the Book of Genesis.