

Noah's Flood and 2 Peter

Young Earth Creationism Violates the Biblical Context

Peter Rüst, CH-3148 Lanzenhäusern, Switzerland

<paraske@aneste.ch>

Texts – 2 Peter 2:5 and 3:5-7

1. Young Earth Creationist prejudice about the Flood

Young Earth Creationism (YEC) believes any kind of death – animal as well as human – to have entered the world with Adam's fall only. So the animals are considered to have been created no more than a very short time earlier. Thus, YECs believe the six "days" of the creation account in 1 Genesis *have* to be taken as normal, directly consecutive days of 24 hours.

So, Young Earth Creationists (YECs) take all fossils of dead creatures to be younger than Adam. As even in the highest mountain ranges not only volcanic rocks are found, but sedimentary ones containing fossils, as well, these mountains are considered to have been piled up later than Adam's fall. YECs take a global flood, even if it lasted less than one year, to be the most plausible cause for such a massive reshaping of the earth's surface. They conclude that this must have been Noah's flood, interpreting Genesis 6-9 as indicating that it surrounded the entire earth. All humans and animals except the ones in Noah's ark would have perished in it.

YECs see a confirmation for this interpretation in 2 Peter, where supposedly the flood is said to have been global, eight people only having survived it. Furthermore, Peter is taken to have presented this flood as a sign pointing to the prophecy of the destruction of the entire earth by fire. YECs consider this to be a further proof for a global extent of the flood. But this YEC argument doesn't hold water.¹

2. A global flood?

In 2 Peter 2:5,² we read that God...

...did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly...

Twice in this verse, Peter talks about the "world" which God is said to have destroyed. In the opinion of the YECs, this means the globe.

3. The flood as a sign pointing to the destruction of the whole earth by fire

About the "scoffers" who "say, «Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation»" (2 Peter 3:3-4), Peter writes in the subsequent verses 5-7:

⁵ ...they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, ⁶ and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. ⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

In these verses, he explicitly draws a parallel between the "earth" or "world" that then existed, which perished, and the "earth" that now exists, which will perish by fire in the judgement. It appears that here there is no possibility of seeing Noah's flood as anything less than global. This text would refute the (according to YEC opinion) erroneous belief in the impossibility of a global flood.

4. Different meanings of the terms "earth" and "world"

According to a Greek concordance of the New Testament, the Greek word *gē* in 2 Peter 3:5 and 7 can mean "earth", but also "mainland", "country", "region", "ground", "soil", "inhabited earth" or "humanity".

¹ Pun intended.

² Unless indicated otherwise, the English Standard Version (ESV, update 2007) of a biblical text is shown.

The Greek word *kosmos* in 2 Peter 2:5 and 3:6 can mean "world", but also "humanity", "public", "way of life", "humanity alienated from God", "worldwide dominion", "powers opposing God", "earthly reality", "heavenly reality", "universe", as well as "jewelry" or "decoration". In the text of 2 Peter 3:5-7 quoted above, the two words *gê* (earth) and *kosmos* (world) are apparently used for the same object.

Similarly, according to a Hebrew concordance of the Old Testament, the very frequently occurring Hebrew word *'eret*, which is used in the flood account of Genesis 6-9, can designate the "earth", but also "mainland", "land", "country", "region", "soil", even "the inhabitants of the land", as well as other concepts. For a meaningful interpretation of the first Genesis chapters, and in particular also those dealing with the flood, a careful consideration of this problem is therefore indispensable.

One has to find the precise meaning of a word from the immediate as well as wider context. That 2 Peter 2 and 3 use the words "earth" and "world" by no means guarantees that they necessarily stand for our planet. Nor does it necessarily imply that all of humanity is included.

5. Why was 2 Peter written?

Peter wrote his two letters probably about in the years 63-64, shortly before Paul (whom he mentions in 2 Peter 3:15-16) was martyred during the persecution under the emperor Nero. He probably wrote from Rome (1 Peter 5:13). He himself expected to be martyred shortly (2 Peter 1:14).

Peter wrote his first letter "to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1). These were countries in north and middle Asia Minor. The same recipients seemed to have been the addressees of his second letter (2 Peter 3:1). Apparently, 2 Peter is a last short legacy to the christian churches there.

In his second letter, Peter wants to warn and encourage the persecuted christians, who were threatened by two principle dangers:

- (1) heretics trying, by false teaching, to seduce the christians into a godless way of life;
- (2) scoffers making fun of these believers who were hoping Jesus would come back soon, with the same result of godlessness.

6. God's righteousness in history

In 2 Peter 2, the first section (verses 1-3a) warns about seduction by false prophets. In the second section (verses 3b-9), Peter points out that God will judge such ungodly ones, but save the believers out of this judgment. As an illustration, he shortly mentions three cases from God's history with his creatures whom he had given a free will – who therefore are responsible: the fallen angels; the judgment of the flood, out of which the righteous Noah was saved; then, somewhat more fully, Sodom and Gomorrah, where the righteous Lot was saved. After verse 9, he returns to the description of the godlessness of the heretics and seducers.

Peter was not specifically interested in telling about Noah or teaching something about a global or local extent of the flood. The volcanic catastrophe which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was clearly of local extent, and the fall of the angels has nothing at all to do with earthly dimensions.

7. God's word is reliable

In 2 Peter 3, the first section (verses 1-7) begins with emphasizing the reliability of the promises and predictions which God has given through his prophets and apostles (the prophets in the Old Testament – the apostles in the gospels and letters which today are included in the New Testament).

Then Peter warns about the seducers who scoff about these promises and charges them with ignorance. To be precise, they ignore the course of God's salvation history. As an illustration out of this history, Peter again adduces the flood. In this example, he not only emphasizes the reliability of an earlier divine warning of judgment over the godless, but also, at the same time, the certainty of the coming judgment awaiting these scoffers. On the other hand, he points to the fact that the believers may confidently expect the fulfillment of the promise of Christ's return, which is being scoffed about.

The fulfillment of prophecies does not always run after the same pattern: in the flood, the judgment occurred through water, but at the Lord's coming, the judgment will occur through fire. Thus, the point of

comparison of the illustration is not any of the details of what happened – nor is it its global or local extent –, but only the reliability of the prediction.

8. The mistake of the scoffers

Peter also emphasizes the fact that the expectation of the Lord coming soon was not disproved by its fulfillment having been delayed for about 30 years already. He explains it with the Lord being patient, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He has just pointed out that we must not expect God informing us how long he will have any period last in his guiding of history (verse 8):

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

YECs should therefore also be careful not to jump to the conclusion that the creation "days" were 24-hour days.

In his statement in 2 Peter 3:5 –

...that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,...

– Peter uses the example of the creation to illuminate three aspects of God's guiding history:

- (1) the universe (the "heavens") existed since primeval times (for "long ago", the NKJ³ has "of old");
- (2) the mainland (the "earth") emerged out of the water (for "formed out of water", the NKJ has "standing out of water")
- (3) the mainland (the "earth") continued existing through water (for "through water", the NIV⁴ has "by water", the NKJ "in the water") – water is a symbol for God's word: "by God's word" apparently is an explanation of the phrase "continuing through water".

A long duration of a state of affairs does not exclude the possibility that God may suddenly bring in a judgment like Noah's flood. Therefore Peter continues in verse 6:

... by means of these [*waters*] the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

The extent of that particular catastrophe, whether "world" is here used in a global or local, geological or social sense, is quite beside the point in this context. Peter's aim is to refute the scoffers who don't take seriously God's word. In Jude's parallel to Peter's warnings (Jude 9 and 14-15), we see that even apocryphal, mythical stories (*Assumption of Moses*, *Book of Enoch*) can be used in such illustrations, of course without necessarily endorsing their historicity – much less any details.

9. YEC violates the context

Nothing in 2 Peter has anything to do with whether the flood was global or not, or whether every creature outside the ark perished or not. The YEC interpretation of verses 2:5 and 3:5-7 ignores their context, and therefore distorts the biblical text.

YECs claim to take the bible literally, but they fail to realize that words and concepts like "earth" and "world" may be ambiguous. Genuinely taking the bible literally requires taking into consideration the context of the phrase or sentence in the paragraph, in the book, in the entire bible, in the real environment of the contemporary language and culture. It is only in this way that one can do justice to the principle of the plenary divine inspiration of the bible. The biblical text has to be taken *more* seriously and literally than the YECs do.

Peter's side remarks about Noah's flood are very well compatible with a local flood – a global flood is physically impossible. It isn't even feasible to determine Peter's own ideas about this question of the extent of the flood. *If* he believed that it was global, God kept him from unmistakably stating such an opinion in his two letters – which, in God's plan, were to be received into the biblical canon.

³ New King James Version (1982).

⁴ New International Version (US, 1984).