

CONCLUSION

The observation that Genesis 4:10b offers evidence for the murder, is confirmed both by a structural analysis and a close reading. Human retribution is not at stake in the narrative, but rather the theodicy (God's righteous judgment). 4:10b creates a vivid picture of crucial evidence that cannot be concealed. This evidence is personified as a living witness that cannot be silenced before the divine prosecutor and judge.

Such a reading of Genesis 4:10b has ethical implications, since the pericope has a paradigmatic function. Crimes committed in secret are known to God only. Abel's blood calling out is indicative of God who in time exposes serious crimes. The pericope also indicates that an outcry for justice should cease when justice has been done. God immediately and fully dealt with the crime, so that ongoing demands for restitution cannot be justified with reference to blood calling out in Genesis 4:10b.

GOD'S DESTRUCTION OF THE EARTH BY THE FLOOD
(GENESIS 6:13)

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Eric Peels has paid much attention to how God revealed himself in the Old Testament. After completing his Ph.D. on 'wrath', he wrote about God's 'shadow sides' and investigated texts considered problematic by many Christians.¹

Following his approach, I choose to deal with a passage in which the wrath of God manifests itself in a special way, the Flood eradicating most of humanity. Starting point is Genesis 6:13: 'And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth".'

The last words are striking: not only will all the people be destroyed, but also the earth itself. It raises questions such as: What is meant by the destruction of the earth? A total annihilation can be excluded, because the earth continues to exist and later it is possible for Noah and his family to inhabit it. How extensive was the destruction? And what does this say about how God deals with creation and with humanity?

To get some answers, I would first like to pay attention to certain terminology, especially the words 'destroy' and 'earth'. Next, I will examine whether an extensive regional flood or a global flood is meant. Then I will touch on the tension between the narration and the geological data and define more clearly the character of the destruction of the earth. Next, I will deal with the relationship between God's punishment and his mercy. Finally, I will refer to the New Testament.

THE VERBS USED FOR GOD'S DEALINGS

The first verses of Genesis 6 describe the situation on earth whereby the sons of God and daughters of men mixed with each other. YHWH saw that the wickedness of humankind was great (v. 5). He was sorry that he had made humankind, and it grieved him to his heart (v. 6). After this expression of grief, the verdict follows: 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air' (v. 8).

The verb *מחה* is used in 6:7 and 7:4,23 and means: 'to wipe off/out' or 'to blot out'. Often, this term implies a complete removal of whatever is in view. In terms of judgment, the verb is employed to describe the complete removal (and thus blotting out) of life by the Flood, and later it denotes the complete obliteration of the memory of Amalek.² In the story of the Flood, the verb refers to the destroying of all of mankind on earth.

¹ H.G.L. Peels, *Wie is als Gij? Schaduwwijzen aan de Godsopenbaring van het Oude Testament*, Zoetermeer 1996. (ET: *Shadow Sides: God in the Old Testament*, Carlisle 2003).

² C. van Dam, 'מחה', in: *NIDOTTE* II, 913-914.

The verb *שחַת* is used in 6:11-13, 17 and 9:11, 15, meaning ‘to become corrupt’, ‘to destroy’. The earth was corrupt and all flesh had corrupted its ways (6:11-12). God determined to destroy the earth (6:13) and he does the same to all flesh in which is the breath of life (6:17), but in the future never again will a flood destroy the earth and all flesh (9:11, 15). The thorough devastation denoted by *שחַת* makes it apt vocabulary for pronouncements and descriptions of divine judgment. The verb is also used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon and Tyre. Sometimes a complete destruction of a place is meant, but God never completely destroyed his people.³ In Genesis 6 the earth will undergo a heavy judgment by the Flood, but continues to exist.

EARTH AND GROUND

In Genesis 6-9 the word *הָאָרֶץ* is used frequently. It denotes the dry land where mankind and many animals live. In 1:9-10 the dry land and the sea were separated. After the Flood came upon the earth, 8:13 states that the waters were dried up from the earth. In 6:11-13 the earth is depicted as depraved due to the violence of the people. Here, *הָאָרֶץ* shows little distinction from the ‘human world’. Usually, however, *הָאָרֶץ* is distinguished from mankind.

Several times the word *אֲדָמָה* is used (e.g. 6:1, 7; 7:4, 8), as a designation of the ground, the surface of the earth. In 8:21, YHWH promises that he will not curse the ground because of man. Here the residence of man is referred to. In the following verse it is promised that all the days of the earth the alternation in seasons and days will continue (8:22). In 9:11, God promises that never again will a flood destroy the earth. Here, *הָאָרֶץ* seems to mean the place where man and animal live and not just humanity. God establishes his covenant with man and animal and gives his bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant between him and the earth.

In Genesis 6-8 the earth as the place where mankind and the animals live, is swallowed up by water. The Hebrew words do not denote the modern concept ‘globe’. The destruction refers to the possibilities to live upon the earth. Now the question arises: is the whole earth with all the peoples to be destroyed or only the region in which Noah lived?

A REGIONAL OR GLOBAL FLOOD?

John Walton differentiates between several approaches to the extent of the Flood and mentions four possibilities:⁴

1. Global: The Flood covered the entire globe.
2. Known world: The Flood was universal relative to the world known to the audience of the Old Testament. This is a massive flood, but did not include other continents or areas of the world, such as China.
3. Regional: An extensive regional flood has occurred. It may have centred in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, the Mediterranean basin, or the area of the Black Sea.
4. Local: The Flood wiped out several towns along the river.

³ C. van Dam, ‘שחַת’, in: *NIDOTTE* IV, 92-93.

⁴ J.H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC), Grand Rapids 2001, 322. With regard to the first position, ‘global’ and ‘globe’ are modern designations.

Walton does not make a clear choice, but considers the first approach scientifically (geologically) problematic. Yet, Genesis gives us the impression of a universal flood, especially in view of the following four textual issues: universal scope of the language (7:21-23), covering the mountains (7:19), fifteen cubits above the mountains (7:20), and the tops of the mountains becoming visible.⁵ For the first three issues Walton has explanations suggesting a regional flood. At the fourth issue he notes:

[I]t covered all the elevated places that were within eyesight of the occupants of the ark. Though this would be a geographically limited flood, it could still be anthropologically universal if people had not yet spread beyond this region.⁶

Walton is not satisfied with any of the four possibilities and regards the case as ‘unresolved’.⁷

In Europe, the inquiry on the extent of the Flood began in the seventeenth century. Until that time, it was common in Jewish and Christian circles to accept a worldwide flood. The first change in this view is to be found in the work of Isaac La Peyrère. He shocked Europe in 1655 by arguing for a pre-Adamic humanity.⁸ He argued that only the Jews were the descendants of Adam. He claimed that Scripture only intended to tell their history—Gentiles had another history and line of descent. La Peyrère also posited that the Noahic Flood must have been a local event, due to the continuity of pre-Adamic streams of humanity to the present, while Noah’s family belonged to the Adamic stream.⁹ Several other works in the late seventeenth century also argued for a less than universal flood, though these works—in contrast to La Peyrère’s—maintained that apart from Noah and his family it nonetheless destroyed all existing humanity.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century the theory of a local or regional flood became more prevalent. In England, John Pye Smith advocated the notions of a local creation and a local flood occurring both in Mesopotamia (1837), while George Young attacked this position and defended a universal flood, referring to geological finds (1838, 1840).¹¹

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF A GLOBAL FLOOD

- 1) The expressions ‘earth’, ‘all’, ‘every’, and ‘under the heaven’ all point in the direction of a very large area. Yet, use of these words is not decisive because elsewhere they function as hyperbolic expressions.¹² Still, in Genesis 6-9 the many expressions reinforce each other. Genesis 7:19-23 gives by the repeated enumeration (eight times ‘all’ / ‘every’ in Hebrew) as opposed to ‘only Noah’ (v. 23) an important indication of the worldwide situation.¹³

⁵ Walton, *Genesis*, 324.

⁶ Walton, *Genesis*, 328.

⁷ Walton, *Genesis*, 329.

⁸ Isaac La Peyrère, *Praeadamitae*, Amsterdam 1655.

⁹ W. VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins*, Grand Rapids 2015, 89-90.

¹⁰ These works included Isaac Vossius (1659), Abraham van der Mijle (1667), Edward Stillingfleet (1675) and Matthew Poole (1678). Jean le Clerc was deeply skeptical of a global flood (VanDoodewaard, *Quest*, 95). Cf. A. Pietsch, *Isaac La Peyrère. Bibelkritik, Philosemitismus und Patronage in der Gelehrtenrepublik des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2012.

¹¹ See the description of the positions in T. Mortenson, *The Great Turning Point*, Green Forest 2004, 168-177.

¹² E.g. in Gen 41:54, 57; Deut 2:25; Jos 4:24; 1 Sam 17:46.

¹³ Cf. K.A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (NAC), Nashville 1996, 365, 380-381.

- 2) The construction, outfitting, and stocking of the Ark could be considered as unnecessary if the Flood were to be only a local flood. Migration would have been a far better solution to the problem, for Noah as well as the birds and beasts. In a local flood, most of the fauna can escape death by fleeing the rising waters or by swimming to dry ground, or in the case of birds by flying away; but this would be impossible in a universal flood. In a regional flood relatively few birds would die, contrasting with statements in 6:7 and 7:3,23.
- 3) The duration of the Flood is longer than is the case with a regional flood. Here, 40 days of rain are mentioned, the water reached a highest point and decreased only after 150 days (8:3). The extreme duration of the Flood indicates its universal character. The particular word מְבַרֵךְ also seems to point in that direction.¹⁴
- 4) At the dawn of the Flood water comes from below and above (7:11) and the earth is covered with water. From the terminology used, it appears that the separation between water and dry land (1:2,6-7) ceases and threatens to undo creation. In Genesis 6-8 creation motifs often accompany the description of humans and animals.¹⁵ Now a certain un-creation is coming about and that indicates global effects.
- 5) All the mountains ‘under the whole heaven’ were inundated under at least fifteen cubits of water (half the height of the Ark, probably representing its depth of submergence), telling us that the Ark could float freely over all mountains. Water seeks the lowest place, would not rest long above the mountains, but would flow downward. The ark would have been carried away, not to the mountains of Ararat.¹⁶
- 6) Only Noah and those with him in the Ark survived the Flood, so that all present mankind are descended from Noah’s three sons (see also Gen 9:1,19). Likewise, all the earth’s present dry-land animals are descendants of those in the Ark (8:17,19; 9:10). The very purpose of God had been to destroy all other living men (6:7) and land animals (6:17; 7:22). Although the list of nations in Genesis 10 is likely not complete, the overview shows that all of the named peoples on three continents (Africa, Asia, Europe) are descended from Noah and his sons (see also 11:1,9).
- 7) God’s promise never to send such a flood again (8:21; 9:11,15) has been broken repeatedly if it referred to a local or regional flood.

¹⁴ The word מְבַרֵךְ ‘flood’ is used only in Gen 6-9 and in Ps 29:10.

¹⁵ Gen 6:6-7 (creation of human beings); 7:14 (animals, in relation to 1:21,24,25); 8:17 (to multiply, in relation to 1:22).

¹⁶ C.F. Keil declared: ‘To speak of such a flood as partial is absurd, even if it broke out at only one spot, it would spread over the earth from one end to the other, and reach everywhere to the same elevation’. See C.F. Keil, F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids 1973, Vol. 1, 146. According to J.D. Sarfati part of the mountains could have been formed during and after the Flood (cf. Ps 104:8), so that their height was less than it is now. There are maritime fossils found on high mountains such as the Mount Everest. See his *The Genesis Account: A theological, historical, and scientific commentary on Genesis 1-11*, Powder Springs 2015, 525-529, 559.

- 8) After the Flood, cosmological conditions were promised, including recurring seasons (8:22), the rainbow along with rain (2:5; 9:13-14), and enmity between man and beasts (9:2). God’s covenant concerns not only Noah and his descendants, but also the earth and the animals (9:13-17). What value would this covenant have if only a region and only the animals in that environment are meant?
- 9) In addition to the listed promises there are indications that Noah is to be considered a new Adam.¹⁷ The command to multiply and to control the earth is first given to Adam (1:26-28) and then repeated for Noah (9:1-2,7). Also, the provision on food is repeated, and for Noah expanded with animal food (1:29-30; 9:3). Striking is the individual approach regarding Noah: ‘as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything’, indicating a new ancestor of mankind. Also the ban on murder (9:6) indicates the whole of humanity.¹⁸
- 10) Later biblical writers accepted the universal Flood. It is likely that this is the case in Psalm 104:6-9 and Isaiah 54:9-10.¹⁹ Clearer are the passages in the New Testament that place the Flood in a worldwide setting, especially 2 Peter 2:5 and 3:5-7.
- 11) In Mesopotamia clay tablets are found with traditions that are in some agreement with Genesis 6-9. In the Atrahasis Epic the gods sent a flood to wipe out all humans. The god Enki warned Atrahasis in a dream and advised him to make a boat.²⁰ In the Gilgamesh Epic, the hero passes countries, mountain peaks and seas to end up at the home of his ancestor Utnapishtim, who lives on an island paradise in a distant sea, beyond the end of the world. Utnapishtim tells about the great flood that destroyed humanity.²¹ These traditions point towards a universal rather than a regional flood. There is no direct relationship with Genesis, but it is important that the Book of Genesis is not alone in this respect.²²

On the basis of these arguments, it is likely that the author of Genesis intended a global flood.²³

RELATIONSHIP WITH GEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

It is interesting how authors have dealt with the relationship between the earth sciences and the message of the Book of Genesis. More than a century ago Samuel Driver wrote:

It is manifest that a flood which would submerge Egypt as well as Babylonia must have risen to at least 2,000 feet (the height of the elevated country between them), and have thus been in fact a

¹⁷ Cf. G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC), Waco 1987, li, and Mathews, *Genesis*, 351.

¹⁸ In both stories ‘the image of God’ is mentioned, and both Adam and Noah have dominion over the animals (giving them names and letting them survive). Cf. B.K. Waltke, C.J. Fredericks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2001, 128.

¹⁹ The words of Ps 104 also refer to creation, but v. 9 points to the Flood.

²⁰ COS 1.130:451.

²¹ COS 1.132.

²² Compare also ‘The Eridu Genesis’ (COS 1.158) and the publication of a Babylonian tablet from about 1750 BCE in Irving Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood*, London 2014. In these polytheistic texts the reasons for the Flood are not the same as in Genesis.

²³ W.H. Gispen understands especially 6:13 and 9:11,13 as pointing to a universal flood. See *Genesis*, dl 1 (COT), Kampen 1974, 232.

universal one (...) a flood on the other hand, which did less than this is not what the biblical writers describe, and would not have accomplished what is represented as having been the entire *raison d'être* of the Flood, the destruction of all mankind.²⁴

For Driver it is clear that the description means a universal flood, but such a flood is impossible on scientific grounds, with the consequence that the description has to be considered as unhistorical.

Using geological information, Hugh N. Ross,²⁵ Davis Young and Ralph Stearley²⁶ try to defend a regional flood. Paul H. Seely is convinced that the description in Genesis points to a universal flood, not to a local one. However, he is of the opinion that our knowledge of geology, glaciology, and archaeology falsifies the extent of the Flood as it is described in Genesis 6-9. This is no problem for him, because the description is accommodated to 'the notions which then prevailed', to use one of Calvin's phrases. The account is accommodated to the geography of the times ('the whole earth') and the cosmology of the times ('the sources of the water'). His conclusion is: 'The Flood account is not trying to educate scientifically but is accommodated to their prior scientific understanding'.²⁷

In my evaluation of Seely's position I am willing to accept accommodation in the description of scientific matters. However, it is problematic to use this concept for the general message of the passage. When Noah is depicted as a second Adam, and as forefather of the whole new humanity, this is not an accommodation to the understanding of the readers of Genesis, but a clear message.²⁸

The question can be asked how Noah and his people knew what happened in other parts of the world. The description of the Flood in Genesis is not presented as primarily based on human perception. Time and again God's acts are mentioned: he sees what transpires on earth, judges, chooses Noah and gives commands to build the Ark. God then calls him into the Ark and closes the door. During the Flood, God remembers Noah and later gives commands to leave the Ark. In fact, Noah speaks not a word in the entire passage of the Flood and his perception is not mentioned.²⁹

Noah is in line with Adam and is the second forefather of mankind. The knowledge of the geography of the world in those days was extensive (at least in the lists in Gen 10), even though it was not complete. It is possible to assume that not all people perished, but the description assumes that this is the case. The exegesis has to deal first with the intention of the text, after which it is—to a certain extent—possible to address the scientific questions that arise.

²⁴ S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, London 1904, 101.

²⁵ H.N. Ross, *The Genesis Question*, Colorado Springs 1994.

²⁶ D. Young, R. Stearley, *The Bible, Rocks, and Time*, Downers Grove 2008. Cf. the discussion in K.D. Keathley, M.F. Rooker, *40 Questions about Creation and Evolution*, Grand Rapids 2014, Questions 30 and 31, 285-310.

²⁷ P.H. Seely, 'Noah's Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation', *WTJ* 66 (2004), 291-311.

²⁸ See the critique on this use of the word 'accommodation' by A. Huijgen in *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment*, Göttingen 2011, 374-377, 384-387.

²⁹ The only words of Noah are in Gen 9:25-27. A.A. Snelling, *Earth's Catastrophic Past: Geology, Creation & the Flood*, Dallas 2009, 110, ref. 8. Snelling accepts biblically and geologically a worldwide flood.

DESTRUCTION OF THE EARTH

On the basis of these considerations, it is likely that the destruction of the whole earth was intended (6:13; 9:11,13). This means in the coherence of Genesis a return to the third day of creation, when God made a separation between dry land (the earth) and waters (the seas). That separation is undone in response to the wickedness of mankind.

In Genesis 3:17 the verdict is that the ground is cursed (אָרִיכָה), with the result that the ground will bring forth thorns and thistles. Later, YHWH promises: 'I will never again curse (לֹא אֶקְלֶה) the ground because of humankind' (8:21). What is the meaning of this phrase? The parallel expression is 'nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done'.³⁰ It is possible to conclude that the second cursing of the ground means the destruction as described in the previous chapters. It was the situation that no longer would life on earth be possible. Instead of this terrible condition Noah received blessings, promises about good conditions for living, and the repetition of several commands previously given to Adam as head of humanity. The new humanity is called to be fruitful and multiply, to abound upon the earth. As a sign of the promises and the covenant with Noah and every living creature, the bow in the clouds is given (8:20-9:17).

Despite God's compassion, there was no respite from the curse of death and hardships as reaction on Adam's sin. Rather, while Adam's curse continues, God promises not to impose any repeated destroying of the earth. The language of 8:21 is tied to 6:7, the decision to blot out human beings and animals, not to 3:17 ('cursed is the ground because of you'). 'The troubling aftermath of the Edenic curse with its toil and pain continues in the renewed world'.³¹

PUNISHMENT AND MERCY

In the Book of Genesis, a pattern of punishment as well as mercy is discernible. The first chapters show that the offence is punished, yet God goes further in his relationship with mankind (Gen 3). A positive promise for the future of humanity is given (v. 15). Later, Cain is sentenced to an itinerant life, but he also received protection (Gen 4). The Flood had very serious consequences for humans, animals and the earth, but a small group of people and animals are rescued. After the Flood, God's promises for the future are given.

Genesis 11 mentions the spread of humanity after the (interrupted) construction of the Tower of Babel. The nations after the dispersion are listed in Genesis 10. Against this background, the election of Abraham is narrated, to form a separate people and to become a blessing for the world (Gen 12:3).³²

The Flood narrative shows that God is able to bring restoration where he has brought destruction. The re-creation theme in the Flood narrative shows God starting again with humanity. Later it turns out that God in his judgments on Israel again and again saves people to realize his promises in them. In his action, God's mercy and grace come to the fore (Exod 33:19). In the Book of Isaiah the steadfast love of YHWH is illustrated by comparing God's promise in the days of Noah with the future of Israel: 'This is like the days of Noah to

³⁰ In both sentences the expression אֶקְלֶה 'I go forth' is used.

³¹ Mathews, *Genesis*, 394.

³² Based on the passive translation in Gen 12:3 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'.

me: just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you' (Isa 54:9).

In the Wisdom of Sirach it is stated that Noah was found righteous and 'a remnant was left on the earth' (Sir 44:17). With the word 'remnant', an important concept in the Old Testament is evoked. The prophets in particular, use this word to announce the escape of a minority despite a severe judgment.³³

The theme of re-creation is developed later in Scripture in relation to the exile, Israel's great political and theological crisis. In that context, the prophet Jeremiah is initially given a message that focuses on plucking up, pulling down, destroying, overthrowing, building and planting (Jer 1:10). In the introduction to the new covenant, God says:

The days are surely coming (...) when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant (Jer 31:27-28).³⁴

In this light God's actions in and after the Flood can be seen.

Eric Peels ends his book *Shadow Sides* with an overview of God's forgiveness. He points out that in the relationship between God and his people, time and again forgiveness prevents breaking off the history of salvation. That has to do with God's faithfulness to the covenant. Forgiveness and retaliation, love and revenge, are often two completely opposite things for us, but in him they can go together. 'O LORD, our God, (...) you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings' (Ps 99:8).³⁵

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament several times refers to the Flood and the time when Noah lived. The time when the Son of Man comes, resembles the time prior to the Flood (Matt 24:37-39). Especially the letters of Peter refer to the Flood narrative. God did not spare the ancient world when he brought the Flood on the world of the ungodly (2 Pet 2:5). The author warns that the earth will perish by fire, as once happened by water (3:5-7). '[T]he elements (στοιχεῖα) will be dissolved with fire' (3:10).

From the parallel between destroying the earth by water and by fire, it is possible to assume that, according to the New Testament, the future judgment will not be complete destruction, but only a destruction of 'the elements' in order to come to a new earth. That points to continuity between the cursed earth and the renewed creation in the eschaton.³⁶ And this urges humankind to listen carefully to YHWH, in his actions and words—also the actions in the days of Noah—to

prepare itself for the future. 'But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (3:13).

³³ E.g. Isa 7:3 and Zeph 3:13. Cf. 'Heil voor het overblijfsel van Israëel', in: M.J. Paul, G. van den Brink *et al.*, (eds), *Bijbelcommentaar Hosea-Maleachi* (StBOT, 12), Doorn 2015, Excursus 6, 849-857.

³⁴ Cf. Walton, *Genesis*, 337-338.

³⁵ Peels, *Wie is als Gij?*, 153, 157. Cf. Exod 34:6-8.

³⁶ G.R. Kreider, 'The Flood Is as Bad as It Gets: Never Again Will God Destroy the Earth', *BS* 171 (2014), 418-439. See p. 431. In this article the focus is on the future renewal instead of a transformation *ex nihilo*. That view also has consequences for dealing with the earth and the environment.