

Noah's Flood – The Bible, the Science & the Controversy

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Part 1 – The Bible and the Vapor Canopy Theory

Introduction

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.

(Genesis 7:11 NKJV)

With this astonishing economy of words, Moses records the beginning of our earth's worst geologic disaster to date, carefully noting its specific year, month, and day in history. While many deny the literal interpretation of the Genesis flood narrative, there is nothing in this passage to indicate that it is anything except a factual, historical account of a worldwide flood to which Jesus Himself and the New Testament writers referred.¹

But if a global flood actually occurred as described in the Bible, where did all that water come from and where did it go? What *were* the fountains of the great deep? What could have generated 40 days and nights of torrential rainfall all over the world? How could there possibly have been enough water to cover all the mountains as the Bible states?

These are some of the challenging questions that Christians must address if we say we believe the biblical account, but too few are equipped to do so. Instead, some Christians accept the unbiblical "local flood" idea. However, the Bible and logic quickly leads us to dismiss this option. For example, wouldn't people simply flee local flood waters? And what about people and animals that lived outside the flood region? They would not have perished, whereas Scripture clearly states that *all* humans and air-breathing animals perished except those on the ark.

Other Christians simply ignore the hard questions altogether. One reason is that several centuries of scientific work based on the assumption that the global flood is a religious myth has produced false ideas that are now firmly embedded in our educational institutions, the media and, sadly, many churches. As a result, our college students are often ill-prepared to defend against their professors' relentless attacks on the Bible's credibility. Tragically, many then abandon their confidence in the Bible and even their faith in Jesus, choosing to instead adopt the religion of atheistic secular humanism and *its* god, evolution.

But what does Noah's flood have to do with evolution? Everything! The global flood is the *key* event in the creation-evolution debate. If the layers of fossils, averaging about a mile deep on the continents, are a consequence of a flood, then they are *not* the product of millions of years of evolution! Secular scientists agree with creation scientists that without millions of years, evolution is without merit.

However, there is *abundant* evidence – biblical, scientific, and anthropological – of a global flood in ancient times. In fact, anthropologists have documented more than 230 flood legends from all over the world, most remarkably similar to the Genesis account and thus supporting its historical accuracy.

¹ Matthew 24:37-38, Luke 17:26-27, Hebrews 11:7, 1 Peter 3:20, 2 Peter 2:5.

More than 50 years ago, the evidence prompted a theology professor, Dr. John C. Whitcomb, and a Virginia Tech mechanical engineering hydraulics professor, Henry M. Morris, to propose a scientific flood explanation in their 1961 landmark publication, *The Genesis Flood*. Many believe that this book was responsible for launching the modern-day creation science movement. In 1970, Morris founded the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), which has become one of the world's leading creation research groups.

Today, literally hundreds of individuals, groups, and organizations around the world are dedicated to researching and communicating scientific evidence for creation and the global flood. Founded in 1963, the Creation Research Society (CRS) is the longest-standing creationist organization in the US. In addition to ICR and CRS, the largest and most well-known creationist organizations are: Creation Ministries International of Australia (CMI, formerly Answers in Genesis (AiG) and then AiG-Australia) and Answers in Genesis (AiG, formerly AiG-US). Smaller but also well-known is the Center for Scientific Creation (CSC).

As stated, there is abundant evidence for a worldwide flood in the past. How that evidence is interpreted and ideas about the water's "where from" and "where to" are topics of much debate – even acrimony, unfortunately – among creationist researchers today.

In this four-part series of articles, I will briefly describe three of today's well-known flood theories – the Vapor Canopy Theory (VCT), the Hydroplate Theory (HPT), and the Catastrophic Plate Tectonics (CPT) Theory – and compare them with scientific evidence and our ultimate authority, the Bible. While there are other flood explanations, these three are the most well-known at this time. I will conclude this series by examining issues that I believe are hindering our progress in the critical area of flood research. These issues include a longstanding controversy within the creation science community that was exposed in a recent video production from a well-respected creationist apologetics organization.²

The information in these articles was derived in part from interviews and correspondence with 17 individuals, including representatives from the five major creation ministries mentioned above and other creationist researchers and leaders. (Another 16 declined to be interviewed.)

The Bible

The flood narrative is found in Genesis Chapters 6 through 8, which is the longest passage in the Bible devoted to a single event. In Genesis 6, we read of God's great sorrow over the wickedness of man and His resolve to "*blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them*" (Genesis 6:7). We also see God's gracious salvation of righteous Noah, Noah's family, and the animal race by means of an ark, a type of Christ Who is *our* salvation. Genesis 7 and 8 describe the flood's duration and extent.

These chapters and other Scriptures provide intriguing clues about the source of the flood waters, the geologic impact of the flood, and the scientific processes at work during this cataclysm. They include:

- On Day 3 of Creation Week, the earth (its crust) rose out of the water – God "raqa'd" the earth above the waters. (Genesis 1:9-10; 2 Peter 3:3-6)³
- A large volume of subterranean water existed in the ancient past (Psalm 24:2, 33:7, 104:3, 136:6; 2 Peter 3:5)

² *The Global Flood and the Hydroplate Theory*. Real Science Radio (rsr.org), 2014. DVD/Blue-Ray.

³ The King James Version conveys this idea of land rising out of water: "...the earth standing out of the water..."

- These subterranean waters (all the fountains of the great deep) “burst open” on a single day, and the floodgates of the sky were opened.⁴ (Genesis 7:11, 12; Job 38:8-11; Psalm 18:15; Proverbs 3:20)
- Heavy rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights. (Genesis 7:12)⁵
- For 150 days, the flood waters rose to lift the ark and cover “*all the high mountains everywhere under the heavens*” by 15 cubits (about 22 feet)⁶ (Genesis 7:17-20, 24)
- On Day 150, God “*caused a wind to pass over the earth*” and “*the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained; and the water receded steadily from the earth.*” (Genesis 8:1-2)
- Another 220 days (based upon a 30-day month) passed before the earth was sufficiently dry and safe. Only then did God command Noah, his family, and the animals to leave the Ark.⁷ (Genesis 8:14-17)

Creationists who, like myself, affirm the literal, historical interpretation of the biblical creation and flood accounts must insist that any proposed scientific description of Noah’s flood be consistent with these and other flood passages in the Bible.

The Vapor Canopy Theory

Ask any evangelical pastor or church-goer older than 40 or so about scientific theories for Noah’s flood, and there is a good chance he or she will mention the Vapor Canopy Theory (VCT). With the 1961 publication of *The Genesis Flood*, VCT quickly became the accepted flood explanation among those who believe the Bible.

The VCT was actually first proposed in 1874 by Quaker school teacher Isaac Newton Vail (1840–1912). The original theory proposed that ring-like canopies of water vapor formed in the atmosphere above the earth millions of years ago as the earth evolved from a molten state. Vail hypothesized that these canopies “collapsed” catastrophically upon the earth, one-by-one, producing torrential rainfall and creating the fossil record. Supposedly, the Genesis flood was the result of the last collapse. Vail supported his case primarily with ancient flood accounts, including Babylonian mythology and the Bible, which he also considered mythical.

The idea of an atmospheric vapor canopy as a source for the biblical floodwaters weaves through the later writings of Seventh-day Adventist George McCready Price (1870–1963), Jehovah Witness forerunner Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), Jehovah Witness Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942), and physicist and Seventh-day Adventist Robert W. Woods (1868–1955).

The Genesis Flood and later publications by Morris proposed that the VCT was a scientific explanation not only for the flood waters but also the apparent warmer climate, lush environment, and longer lifespans of the pre-flood earth. Despite increasing awareness of VCT’s many scientific problems, it remained the prominent explanation for Noah’s flood for many decades, in part out of deference to the legacy of Henry Morris. Many Christians *still* think that the VCT is an accepted explanation for the flood.

Today, however, most creation scientists will tell you that the VCT fell out of favor in the creation science community years ago for both biblical and scientific reasons. Biblically, while VCT speaks to the rainfall (*windows of heaven*), it is silent on the preceding causal “*bursting forth*” of the “*fountains of the great deep*” (Genesis 7:11 and 8:2). And while VCT adherents maintain that Hebrew word *raqia*, which is translated the

⁴ The Hebrew word for “burst open” conveys the idea of a violent and complete splitting, sometimes of the earth’s crust. It is also used to describe breaking an egg shell by internal pressure as a baby bird exits.

⁵ The Hebrew word here for “heavy” rain is transliterated as “*geshem*,” which means *violent* rain. In Ezekiel 13:11–13, *geshem* rain, wind, and hail destroyed mortared walls.

⁶ A cubit is usually considered to be 18 inches; some estimate 21 inches. Thus the water level was at least 22 feet above the top of the mountains.

⁷ For a helpful timeline of the flood, see Answers-in-Genesis’ article: “Biblical Overview of the Flood Timeline,” online at: answersingenesis.org/bible-timeline/biblical-overview-of-the-flood-timeline/.

“expanse” or “firmament” in Genesis 1:6-8, is a description of the canopy, others disagree. Even VCT defender Joseph Dillow states, “*We readily admit that Genesis does not teach the existence of a pre-Flood vapor canopy.*”⁸ And in 2013, Dr. John Morris, son of Henry Morris and then ICR’s president, said, “*I still kind of hold to it... the geologic evidence doesn’t support it... the Scripture doesn’t say it... I guess I’m not a real advocate... although I’d like for it to be true.*”⁹

Scientific objections to VCT are numerous, but we will touch on only three. First, *all* canopy theories – and some other flood theories as well – have what is referred to as a “heat problem.” You have probably observed that it takes a long time over high heat to boil a pot of water. This is because liquid water must absorb a lot of energy to turn into steam (water vapor). When you condense steam to re-form liquid water, this same amount of energy is released to the environment and raises its temperature. Simple calculations show that the condensation of a vapor canopy of sufficient size to produce the rainfall described in Genesis would quickly cook the earth and everything on it!

Second, there is the “greenhouse problem.” Today, we hear much about greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, and their effect on Earth’s climate. All atmospheric gases, to varying degrees, act like glass in a greenhouse (or the closed windows in your automobile). Sunlight can pass through the glass more readily than heat can radiate out, so the interior temperature rises. Many are not aware that atmospheric water vapor is Earth’s most abundant and significant greenhouse gas.¹⁰ A vapor canopy as proposed by VCT would render the earth’s surface far too hot to be habitable for humans and animals.

Finally, any substantial canopy of water vapor above the earth would keep its inhabitants from seeing celestial bodies, which God gave to separate day and night and for “*signs and for seasons and for days and years*” (Genesis 1:14-18). A vapor canopy would reflect, absorb, or scatter most light trying to pass through it.

Not surprisingly, Morris’ ICR was the strongest advocate of the Vapor Canopy Theory for many decades. However, in 1998, ICR admitted in an *Acts & Facts* newsletter article that a canopy producing only three feet of rain would result in sufficient heat to destroy all life on the earth.¹¹ In 2003, Dr. Larry Vardiman, formerly Senior Research Scientist at the ICR (now retired) concluded from one study that surface temperatures under a vapor canopy would be livable only if the canopy held very little water or the sun’s output was untenably low. While studies show that the solar constant does vary slightly over various cycles (by less than half of one percent), there is no reason to suppose that such a drastically “dimmed” sun governed the earth’s skies in the past.

Despite its association with Henry Morris, widely and rightly respected as the founder of the modern-day creation science movement, it is time to give the VCT a decent but very public burial. In the words of one creation scientist with whom I spoke, “*Yes, we probably should do more to advertise the death of the Vapor Canopy Theory. If Henry Morris were alive today, I believe he would look at the facts and say it’s time to abandon this and move on!*” (A recent, short Q&A article in the April 2016 *Acts & Facts* newsletter may perhaps be a response to this sentiment.¹² Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of people who think the VCT explains the flood will not read that article.)

⁸ Dillow, Joseph C. *The Waters Above: Earth’s Pre-Flood Vapor Canopy*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981, 222.

⁹ Dr. John Morris, then President of ICR, speaking at the Rocky Mountain Creation Fellowship, September 2013.

¹⁰ Hansen, Kathryn. “Water Vapor Confirmed as Major Player in Climate Change.” NASA News and Features. http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/vapor_warming.html.

¹¹ “Numerical Climate Modeling at ICR.” *Acts & Facts*, April 1998, 2.

¹² Brian Thomas, M.S. 2016. “What Were the ‘Waters Above the Firmament?’” *Acts & Facts*. 45 (5). Online at: <http://www.icr.org/article/9296>

Summary

Here, we have looked at a few key flood passages from the Bible and briefly discussed the VCT, explaining why it is no longer accepted as a viable flood explanation. Part 2 will examine the HPT and Part 3, the CPT theory. Part 4 will discuss the controversy surrounding these theories and discuss ways that we, as a community of Bible-believing, young-earth creationists, can work to restore mutual trust and cooperation – for our Lord’s purposes and to His glory alone.