

Chapters 7 and 8 continue the very familiar story of Noah and the flood. Because of its familiarity, it may be useful to highlight the critical points:

- God *saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become* (6:5). This starting point is repeated in even stronger form near the end of this section: *every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood* (8:21)
- God had kept for himself someone from the wicked generation: Noah was found *righteous in this generation* (7:1; see 6:9). This surely did not mean that he was sinless; more probably, it is in part in comparison with others of that evil generation, and in part a reflection of his close relationship with God.
- God had a plan to deal with the wicked generation: *I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made* (7:4, a condensed form of 6:7).
- God used Noah as part of that plan: *Noah did all that the LORD commanded him* (7:5; see 6:22). This can be seen as a natural extension of the second point.
- God's plan continued with restoration: men and animals both were to *multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it* (8:17).

Notice that in this broad view, the flood itself is an unmentioned implementation detail of God's plan.

We have indicated that some of the above points are repeated from chapter 6; I claim that this repetition is for emphasis, to underscore their importance. Another repetition is more problematic, and we turn to that now.

This section speaks of *seven pairs of every kind of clean animal* (7:2), whereas 6:19-20 spoke only of pairs. We can explain the difference by saying that the chapter 6 instruction was a general statement, one that is more fully clarified here. There is, however, a further complexity. The NIV *seven pairs* in 7:2 and 7:3 is an interpretation: the original Hebrew reads, literally, "take with you seven seven... and of the birds of the air seven seven." This has been understood in two ways:

- seven pairs; the explanatory *a male and its mate* favors this understanding
- exactly seven animals, three pairs for reproducing and one for sacrifice; this is consistent with restricting the subsequent sacrifice to *some of all the clean animals and clean birds* (8:20)

This is an appropriate time to mention something said by many commentators, that the distinction of clean and unclean is anachronistic, because the Levitical laws governing the distinction had not yet been given. This conclusion assumes more than is known; it is certainly possible that the distinction was both known and acted upon far earlier than Leviticus, and that Leviticus simply codified it. Alternatively, the distinction could have been fully explained in God's command, but the explanation was omitted in Genesis because the original hearers were already aware of it, having been given the Law.

Turning to the flood story itself, we find two characteristics of the narration. First, it is firmly anchored in real time (and not in some vague legendary past), with references to a real calendar:

- the flooding started *in the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month* (7:11)
- the ark came to rest on Ararat *on the seventeenth day of the seventh month* (8:4)
- mountains became visible *on the first day of the tenth month* (8:5)
- the water had dried up *by the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year* (8:13)
- the earth had completely dried up *by the twenty-seventh day of the second month* (8:14)

In this way, the text treats the flood as history, not as legend or fable.

But second, many of the time spans are round numbers, arranged in a chiasmic pattern that suggests that the numbers serve a symbolic purpose:

- 7 days' notice before the command to enter the ark (7:4, 13)
  - 40 days of rain (7:17)
    - 150 days of water flooding the earth (7:24)
      - God remembered Noah (8:1)
      - 150 days of water receding (8:3)
    - 40 days between coming to rest and first seeing if the waters had receded (8:6).
  - 7 days between successive times the dove was sent out (8:8-12)

It is certainly possible that God ordained that degree of precise regularity in events. However, it is also possible that round numbers were used for telling the story because they gave structure and order to the

narrative, and because the original hearers valued this structure in the telling far more than they would have the use of exact numbers. This second possibility would certainly be consistent with what we know of ancient story-telling.

Notice that the above list of numbers of days includes an entry that has no time span at all. This is deliberate: God remembering Noah is the central point of the narrative. Before that time, God's destruction continued; after it, God's restoration began. We must not read 8:1 as saying that God had forgotten about Noah, and suddenly he came to mind, necessitating a change in his actions. Rather, it is an assurance that God was always faithful to Noah, both in the times of greatest trouble, when God's faithfulness was not quite as apparent, and when the troubles began to abate, when God's faithfulness became manifest.

A number of commentators hold that the 150 days in 8:3 are the same days as in 7:24, but seen from a different perspective (water beginning to recede versus water still present). If so, this makes the chiasmic pattern described above even more obviously a deliberate narrative choice.

It is possible to misread 7:9-10 to mean that the animals stayed in the ark for seven days before the start of the rain:

<sup>9</sup> *male and female [creatures] came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah.* <sup>10</sup> *And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.*

Entering seven days before the onset of the flood would seem to be the plain sense here, except that it is flatly contradicted in 7:13-14:

<sup>13</sup> *On that very day [the day the rain began, 7:11-12] Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark.* <sup>14</sup> *They had with them every wild animal according to its kind...*

The resolution is that 7:9 and 7:10 are not intended to be sequential (with floodwaters coming seven days after entering). Verse 10 is not intended to specify when men and animals entered the ark, but to emphasize that the rains came precisely when God said that they would, seven days from God's statement in 7:4.

*The ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat (8:4).* This is popularly understood to refer to Mount Ararat. However, Ararat is the Old Testament name for Urartu, a kingdom northeast of Assyria, in the eastern part of modern Turkey. The region is notably mountainous, and the text asserts only that the ark came to rest somewhere in that range.

The question of whether the flood was local or universal has long been debated (sometimes with less charity than might be hoped). I simply do not know enough to come to a firm conclusion in my own mind, so I don't propose to take a position now. However, it must be noted that the plain sense of the text here speaks of a universal flood:

- *all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered (7:19)*
- *The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits<sup>1</sup> (7:20)*
- *there was water over all the surface of the earth (8:9)*

The question, however, is peripheral to the concern of the passage, which is the universality of God's destruction, particularly for mankind:

<sup>21</sup> *Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind.* <sup>22</sup> *Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died.* <sup>23</sup> *Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.*

The high degree of redundancy makes it clear that this is what was to be emphasized. God was starting entirely anew. The end of chapter 8 returns to this, and explains (once more) why it was necessary: *every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood (8:21)*. But now something new is added: this will not be repeated. *Never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.*

The passage makes clear that human nature has not changed, and yet God will no longer start over as he did with Noah. What, then, will be done instead? I believe that we have here the implication of a quite different phase of God's plan for mankind, one that culminated with the death of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> The alternative translation in the NIV, that the waters *rose more than fifteen cubits*, may make excellent grammatical sense, but it seems to fit poorly with the context.