Reading the Book of Genesis as a Literary Unit

By

Christopher J. Moore

The Pentateuch is the Greek name meaning “five rolls” which was bestowed during early Christianity to the first five books of the Old Testament. The Jews refer to it as the Law or Torah which includes the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.¹ The first of these, Genesis, takes its name from the opening words of the sacred text, “In the beginning,” and as the title implies, is a history of origins.² It starts with the creation of the world and features the origin of man, sin and the first consequences of sin together with the first reference to God’s future plan to redeem humanity. Scholars agree that the Pentateuch is not the work of one author but there the agreement seems to end. Several hypotheses concerning the origins and authorship of these ancient texts have been expounded and these will be discussed below but, other more recent scholarship prefers to study the text from a literary perspective. In exploring why the Book of Genesis is perhaps best read as a literary unit, the story of the Flood (Gen. 6-9) will undergo a detailed examination using the traditional historical-critical approach and comparing that perspective with the current views of

literary criticism. By engaging with the work of contemporary scholars, it is intended to demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Before undertaking an assessment of the Flood narrative, it is important to consider the various hypotheses that have been advanced concerning the composition of the Pentateuch. Tradition holds that Moses was the author; however, one obvious criticism of this tradition is that Moses could not have recorded the account of his own death as it appears in the last chapter of Deuteronomy. Secondly, from where did Moses obtain the details of the Creation (Gen 1:1 to 2:3)? It is possible that another author provided the detail for the death of Moses to complete the Pentateuch and some may suggest that if Moses had such an intimate relationship with God, God himself may have related to Moses the creation narrative. However, a lack of agreement in the detail within the text coupled with indications of composite authorship and the use of historical sources as the basis for some of the narratives, suggest that no single author was responsible for the composition of these final documents.³

Documentary Hypothesis

The most popular of theories, the Documentary Hypothesis asserts that four documents have been combined to produce the Pentateuch. Other

hypotheses include the Fragmentary Hypothesis in which it is suggested that a mass of fragmentary units has been pieced together by a skilled editor and the Supplementary Hypothesis which proposes that either existing material was added to or new material was specially written to modify the original work. As it might be expected, there is also a combined premise that incorporates all three hypotheses mentioned.  

With all except the Fragmentary Hypothesis, there is the common problem of attributing the individual sections of the text to a particular document. To demonstrate this predicament the Documentary Hypothesis is considered here in more detail. The 19th century scholar Julius Wellhausen with others, constructed this theory and asserted that the Pentateuch was composed from four distinct sources known as the Jahwist or Jerusalem source (J), the Elohist (E), the Deuteromonist (D), and the Priestly (P). Each source was composed at a different time and each contains its own distinctions: The Jahwist tradition covers an extensive historical period, from creation to the events of Exodus. It includes God’s plan for his chosen people, calls God by the proper name ‘Yahweh’ who speaks directly to man, and it stresses the role of leaders. It is believed by many scholars to be the earliest source. The Elohist source begins later with Abraham and its historical period is much shorter than that of J. God (Elohim, a Hebrew word expressing divinity) speaks to man indirectly through dreams, clouds, fire and finally angels. The Deuteronomistic tradition is restricted mainly to the book of Deuteronomy and

\[4 \text{Ibid., p.16.}\]
emphasises the theological notion of covenant. D names God “Yahweh” and stresses a return to moral fidelity. Finally, the Priestly source is thought to have originated from the priests in Jerusalem probably during the exilic period, though it had a long pre-history. This makes it the most recent of the four sources and is one where God is once more referred to Elohim.⁵

A close examination of elements of the Flood narrative within Genesis should establish evidence for the Documentary Hypothesis. Scholars suggest the most successful way to undertake this study is to consider various parts of the texts in relation to the divine names in order to identify from which of the sources the narrative has been drawn. Davies holds that, rather like the account of the creation, there are two versions of the flood story woven together. He asserts that one version uses the name YHWH (Gen. 6:5, 6, 7; 7:1, 5) and therefore belongs to ‘J’ whereas the verses in between (Gen. 6:11-22) avoid using YWHW using Elohim instead and come from the Priestly source. There are apparent contradictions within the story which add to this theory that sources have been amalgamated, for example, in relation to the number of animals entering the ark, Gen 6:19-20 states it was one pair of each, however 7:2-3 talks of seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean.⁶

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There are also some interesting chronological complications with the flood narrative. These are frequently expressed using Noah’s age with the start date of the rain being the seventeenth day of the second month of Noah’s six hundredth year (Gen 7:11) and sometimes articulated in terms of the actual number of days given for each section of the event. According to the text, the flood is set to last 40 days (Gen 7:17) as foretold (Gen 7:4). However, using the age of Noah, the rain starts to fall on 17.2.600 and the event ends on 27.2.601 when the earth is dry (Gen 8:14). This is a total of 387 days, assuming 30 days in each month. There is also a discrepancy in the final two verses of Chapter 8. In v.13 on the first day of the first month the surface of the ground was dry and yet in the very next verse the earth was described as dry on the twenty seventh day of the second month. These contradictions are just cited as evidence to support the premise that two or more sources were used in the production of the final document.

It is these discrepancies and many others which proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis use to argue the existence of the JEDP sources together with a redactor who has woven the sources together to produce the Pentateuch. However, if the two versions of the Flood narrative are read separately, it is apparent that either elements of the story are missing from one or other of the J and P sources or the redactor has deliberately omitted them. But, when read together as a complete story, the narrative parallels ‘perfectly the Babylonian flood story tradition recorded in Gilgameš Tablet XI’, a poem of the Mesopotamian tradition dating back to 2700 BCE, a
narrative that will be considered again later. In J, for example, there is the record of the birds being sent back and forth to ascertain the current extent of the flood, which is not contained in P. In P the dimensions and structure of the ark are recorded in precise detail but these are completely absent from J. Yet synthesised, the two sources not only parallel the Gilgameš Epic but appear in precisely the same order. Furthermore, it is contended that whilst certain scholars are convinced of the existence of these documents, J for one ‘remains a totally hypothetical construct’.  

Duane Garrett professor of Old Testament at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary argues that the Documentary Hypothesis continues to be argued as providing the answer to the existence of the Pentateuch because no other paradigm exists to replace it. Other scholars assert that historical-critical approaches to studying the Bible may address historical issues but are not adequate in uncovering theological issues. Furthermore, the JEDP theory may provide one explanation for the construction of the Genesis text ‘the new literary criticism explains how the final editor understood and arranged

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his material and it is through this perspective, that this essay will now consider the Flood narrative.

**Literary Analysis**

The literary approach to Genesis concentrates its study of the narrative in its final form and, accepting that it may be drawn from more than one source, it aims to understand *why* the editor or redactor arranged the material in the way he did rather than *how* Genesis was composed. A number of literary devices have been used in order to portray a ‘purposeful theological meaning’ in terms of both human nature and ‘the one God’s treatment’ of mankind. Those literary concepts in Genesis include the use of imaginative writing, language and terminology, poetry, narrative plot and the presence of palistrophic or chiastic verses, together with themes and repetition.

Some are present in the Flood narrative and it may be prudent to consider the human imagination first primarily because stories concerning the complete destruction of mankind are almost a ‘universal feature of the

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human imagination’. A closer examination and comparison between the Flood narrative of Genesis and the Gilgameš Epic mentioned earlier together with another Mesopotamian legend that of Atrahasis is pertinent at this point. The story of the flood in Genesis returns the world to the chaos that existed before the creation and then order is returned through the righteousness of one man, Noah and his family. The flood not only mirrors the story of creation but works as a prophetic act prefiguring the incarnation of God as the Messiah, in the person of Jesus Christ, thus linking Adam, Noah and Jesus Christ in a constant cycle of chaos and creation. Neither the Gilgameš Epic nor Atrahasis contain a full account of the survivors of the flood and certainly nothing comparable with the renewal of humanity described in Genesis, though Atrahasis is closer to Genesis in that the event follows the creation but there the cause of the flood is a quarrel among the gods rather than mankind’s disobedience. Here is one significant theological difference between Genesis and the other narratives: the God of Adam and Noah is monotheistic force who ‘combines mercy and grace with severity’.

Both the Gilgameš Epic and the Genesis narrative refer to animal sacrifice following the receding of the waters. However, in Gilgameš the gods ‘smelled the savour’ and ‘crowded like flies about the sacrificer’ whereas Noah’s sacrifice was one of thanksgiving rather than a means to entreat God

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13 Ibid., p.46.
14 Ibid., p.46.
not to destroy him, after all God had already established his covenant with Noah and by implication, the whole of humanity, prior to the rains. This may assist in explaining the difference in the number of animals encountered in the examination of the Documentary Hypothesis above; the seven pairs of clean animals would be required later in order to perform the sacrifice of thanksgiving. The sacrifice also marks the beginning of a new era in which God accepts the inherent nature of the behaviour of man and approves of the slaughter of animals for sacrificial purposes. This in turn sets the foundations of the ultimate sacrifice that God will make in sending his only Son as the sacrificial lamb who will save man for eternity – though of course the writer or writers of Genesis would have been unaware of the latter point.

There is some interesting use of language in the text of the flood, one word in particular is prominent and that is the use of the word ‘ark’. The order given to Noah by God detailing the construction of the ark describes something akin to the super tankers of the twentieth century. However, the word ‘ark’ is used as opposed to ‘ship’. Scholarly research does not seem to provide a clear reason for this use of the word which appears in another place in the Bible, where Moses is commanded by God to make an Ark of acacia (Ex. 25:10). The dimensions of this ark are much smaller; it is in fact a sacred chest in which Moses is instructed to store the stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant (Ex. 25:15). Each ark therefore is designed to carry a precious or sacred cargo. Noah’s ark is to carry the new
creation from which will spring the human race and all the animals of the land and air, in accordance with the covenant made to Noah before the flood begins. The ark of Moses is to bear the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments (Ex. 31:18). Not only does each ark carry a precious cargo, but they are secure protection, one from the wrath of God, the other from the temper of Moses who destroyed the original tablets of stone in anger (Ex 32:19). This last assertion supports the argument from some quarters that the Pentateuch tradition holds that Moses was the author, but more on that issue later.

One of the most fascinating literary structures in biblical narrative is the use of the chiastic constructions in the development of the plot, which serve to emphasise a particular point. The Flood narrative with Genesis contains a classic example: -

'A Noah and his three sons (6:9-10)

B Violence in God’s creation (6:11-12)

C First divine address: resolution to destroy (6:13-22)

D Second divine address: command to enter the ark (7:1-10)

E Beginning of the flood (7:11-16)

F The rising of the flood waters (7:17-24)

GOD’S REMEMBRANCE OF NOAH (8:1a)

F The receding flood waters (8:1b-5)

E The drying of the earth (8:6-14)

D Third divine address: command to leave the ark (8:15-19)

C God’s resolution to preserve order (8:20-22)

In the instance above, the sequence commences with the character of Noah who is the only upright and just man alone with his family experiencing the calm before the storm. The tension rises rapidly, like the flood waters until the moment that God mysteriously remembers Noah. This is the turning point and pinnacle of the narrative, tension reduces as the water subsides and tranquillity returns. The pattern of the literature matches the rising and falling tensions in the plot. Once again, the narrative not only depicts the events of its own time, but reflects the past and prefigures events yet to come. The chaos and return to tranquillity repeat the creation story, but Noah also prefigures Moses being rescued from the River Nile as an infant (Ex. 2:1-10), the liberation of the Israelites during the flight from Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:15-31), the tale of Jonah and his experience of being shipwrecked, and the emergence of Christ from the River Jordan following his baptism by John (Matt. 3:13-16; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22), not to mention his resurrection from the grave (Jn. 20:1-10) and ascension into glory (Acts 1:16-11). All these incidents therefore, serve to support the theology of the resurrection. The statement ‘God remembers Noah’ is rather curious as it suggests that Noah has been forgotten by God. But God himself balances this apparent lapse through the sign of the bow in the sky which he provides as evidence of His eternal covenant. The

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rainbow, which is a naturally occurring phenomenon, ‘provides a concrete symbol, in this instance to remind God (v. 16) of his promise never to inundate the earth again.’

Emerton provides a detailed critique of Wenham’s version of the chiasm recorded above. First, he argues that the length of the verses varies considerably; some of the lines consist of only half a verse for example the pivotal verse at the centre of the event (Gen. 8:1a), others carry many verses such as the fourth divine address (Gen. 9:1-17). Therefore, the author has had to adjust the length of the lines in order to arrive at a symmetrical pattern but this is not faithful to the text. Secondly, the choice of items to include seems somewhat arbitrary. For instance, the ark is mentioned many times in the Flood narrative, yet in this palistrophe, it is mentioned only twice. Thirdly, there are some important omissions: the animal thanksgiving sacrifice, the first of its kind, is not included, presumably because it has no parallel earlier in the passage. Likewise, the early parts of Chapter 6, which detail both the reasons for the flood and the saving of Noah are absent, even though they are pivotal to the whole narrative perhaps because they too have no parallel in later verses. This chiastic version of the chronology can be exposed as follows:

* 7 days of waiting for the flood (7:4)

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7 days of waiting for the flood (7:10)
40 days of the flood (7:17a)
150 days of water triumphing (7:24)
150 days of water waning (8:3)
40 days’ wait (8:6)
7 days wait’ (8:10)
7 days’ wait (8:12)’

The water builds up as the number of days increases; likewise the receding flood is matched by a corresponding reduction in the number of days listed with the peak appearing at the mid-point. Wenham admits that ‘there is certainly an element of artificiality involved in creating a palistrophe on such a grand scale, particularly in mentioning the number of days in reverse order as here.’

Suffice it to say, that far from being an effective literary device, the chiastic nature of this narrative appears to be far from satisfactory in the eyes of some scholars.

Despite the reservations of these scholars, more recent debate argues that:

‘The chiastic literary structure of Gen 6-9 … provides weighty evidence for the unity of the Flood narrative. Instead of these chapters being divided into small textual units (J and P) as suggested by the Documentary Hypothesis, the narrative is a single literary unit. A close reading of the Flood narrative as a coherent literary whole, with

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particular attention to the chiastic structure, resolves apparent discrepancies in the Genesis account.”

Some of the arguments surrounding the chiastic structure of the text have already been outlined, so what does this more recent research add? First, it is argued that the enveloping of the story within a genealogical framework (Gen. 5:32 and 9:28-29), together with the secondary genealogies (Gen. 6:9-10; 9:18-19) ‘provide powerful indicators that the account is intended to be factual history.’ Moreover, the terminology used in the Genesis Flood narrative supports the argument that this was indeed a universal flood and not the re-telling of some local flood story, be that a myth in itself or an historical event. Examples of this include the terms, “humankind”, “the Earth” and “all flesh”.

Considering first “humankind”, ‘the Lord said 2I will destroy humankind whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I ever made them.’” (Gen 6:7). It is clear that God intends to wipe out his entire creation, except of course, the righteous one Noah and his family and those other creatures he has commanded Noah to take with him into the ark. Furthermore, as God had previously commanded man to ‘fill the earth’ (Gen. 1:28) it is unlikely that the population remained in a local area and, to destroy all humankind, something greater than a local flood was necessary. The term “the Earth”

22 Ibid., pp. 51-52.
appears on 46 occasions in the Flood narrative and does so without any geographical limits being set. It is likely then, that the author is referring to the same “Earth” as that recorded in the creation account (Gen 1:1). Finally, “All flesh” or “all living things”, phrases which are repeated (Gen. 6:12, 13, 17, 19) are very clear, especially when accompanied by verses that speak of man and beast. These three expressions (and there are many others besides) repeated in this narrative and paralleling those in the creation account suggest the totality of the event and not, as some may submit the weaving of several limited flood traditions by an exceptional redactor.²³

Another approach in which the author emphasized the global scale of the deluge is in the depiction of the dimensions of the ark: 300 x 50 x 50 cubits. Whilst there are many different cubit lengths, the common Hebrew length was just less than eighteen inches, which would translate into a vessel some 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 75 feet tall, comparable in size to a modern day super tanker. Arguably, a vessel of these proportions would not be required for a small localised flood, but would be entirely appropriate for a universal deluge. In addition, if the flood was localised, many of the species may have survived or could have been housed beyond the limits of the waters, but no, the biblical account specifically includes the dimensions of the ark and God’s decision to ‘destroy them and the earth’ (Gen. 6:13). What is more, God resolved to destroy every species of bird, so the flood had to be sufficient to cover even the highest peaks, leaving no refuse

uncovered. This fact is confirmed in the statement “And all living things that stirred on earth perished; birds, cattle, wild animals … only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark’ (Gen 7:21-24).24

Another literary quality of Genesis demonstrated within the Flood narrative concerns the prominent nature of a number of universal themes; the first to be considered is that of the creation language. At the outset, the earth was ‘formless and void’ (Gen. 1:2) then God undertook a global work, creating order out of chaos, making man in his own image and commanding him to multiply and fill the earth. In the Flood narrative, God devastates the earth and every living creature, including man, returning it to universal chaos with the exception of Noah and his consignment. After the recession of the waters, God blesses Noah commanding him to ‘breed, multiply and fill the earth’ (Gen. 9:1), repopulating the earth with the creatures from the ark thereby returning order. Sin and the wickedness of man is another prominent theme of Genesis and in God’s view, incorporated the whole of mankind (bar Noah). Sin was the ultimate the motivation for God’s destruction of the earth, though in saving the family of Noah, God resigned himself to the fact that wickedness would prevail as part of the intrinsic human condition. For this reason, the theme of universal covenant is introduced, not simply a covenant with Noah, but to the earth and its

24 Ibid., pp. 63-65.
inhabitants as a whole: ‘I set my bow in the clouds and it will be a sign of the covenant between myself and the earth’ (Gen. 9:13).²⁵

A literary reading of the Flood narrative also presents the reader with some important theological teaching. In the first instance, ‘Noah won favour’ with God (Gen 6:8), he was an ‘upright man ‘and ‘walked with God’ (Gen 6:9), a clear indication that God is at once merciful in saving the faithful and has a personal relationship with his creatures. God also presents as one having complete control over nature, a factor which plays an important part in the New Testament when Jesus, Son of God calms the waters (Mk. 4:35-40), cures the sick (Jn. 5: 1-9) and brings the dead back to life (Jn. 11: 1-45). This is a complete contrast to the gods in the flood epics of the Ancient Near East (ANE) who are portrayed as being weak and frightened.

Earlier it was suggested by proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis that the use of the divine names YHWH and Elohim indicated the presence of two different sources. However, when read as a literary narrative ‘the use of these names seems to highlight different aspects of God’s character’.²⁶ On the one hand, Elohim represents the universal, sovereign and authoritative nature of God whilst YHWH suggests a more intimate character, dealing directly and personally with individual human beings.²⁷ Finally, the word “covenant” first appears in the Flood account of Genesis where God

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 71-72.
²⁶ Ibid., pp.74-76.
²⁷ Ibid., p.75.
promises never again to flood the earth again, a feature which does not appear in any of the other many ANE deluge narratives.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned briefly earlier, many Christians assert that tradition suggests Moses wrote the Pentateuch either by using a number of tablets written by various people who were witnesses or that Moses received the divine words direct from God. There are several biblical references to sustain the latter thesis, which in turn supports evidence that the text should be read as a literary whole, including Exodus 34:27 which says, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'" Arguably this thesis is inadequate because Moses lived hundreds of years after the events in Genesis. In addition, the creation story had no witnesses until at least the fifth day. It might be suggested that Moses: -

> ‘received all his knowledge of the history of the patriarchs directly from God, but we do not make this claim about any other historical book. To the contrary, we assert that the writers of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Luke, and every other historical book in the Bible used sources where the author himself was not a witness to the events.”

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What is certain is that this exploration of a single episode from Genesis has produced a mountain of scholarly debate concerning the origin and nature of the Pentateuch as a whole which tends to explode the ‘myth’ that Moses was the author. However, in this essay only a fraction of that work has been considered. On the one hand, the Documentary Hypothesis argues that the Pentateuch consists of four sources that have been carefully interwoven, edited and changed over a long period of time. Proponents of the hypothesis rely heavily on the use of different divine names in their endeavours to identify the different sources. On the other hand, it is difficult to reconstruct these original documents with any degree of certainty and in relation to the Flood narrative each source has some distinct omissions.

However, reading the narrative as a literary whole allows the reader to consider why the text was written. ‘The Genesis Flood narrative presents profound theology’;29 it is a complete and coherent narrative that offers a number of themes including the image of a monotheistic and merciful God; the concept of covenants between God and man; the corruption of man through sin and most importantly the saving of mankind through one faithful servant, prefiguring the coming of the Messiah in the NT.

Although it is unlikely that anyone will ever suggest an adequate solution to the arguments considered in this essay which is acceptable to all, there is currently a trend among contemporary scholars to view the Pentateuch as a

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literary unit. Many scholars are admitting that the way the books use common words, phrases and motifs and parallel narrative structure, support viewing the five books as a literary whole. Considered in this way, ‘the book emerges as a coherent and well constructed literary work that rewards repeated investigations’.30

Bibliography


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