

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #120: “THE WORLD THAT THEN EXISTED”-- WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

By John Temples

There's a fascinating passage of Scripture in 2 Peter chapter 3. Here is part of that record, verses 3-10:

“...(S)coffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’ For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which **the world that then existed perished**, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”

Here, as Peter gets ready to put down his pen and finish his last New Testament book, he is permitted by inspiration to look ahead to the end of time. He gives the plainest and most detailed Biblical account of what will happen to the earth and this physical universe when the Lord returns: it will be burned up and disappear. He also says that as that time draws near, scoffers and doubters will more and more stridently deny the possibility of such a cataclysmic destruction. Their reasoning will be, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (verse 4). In other words, there have never been any interruptions in the processes of nature; matter is either eternal or very old. Peter answers the scoffers and points out that there certainly has been at least one divine intervention and interruption in natural processes, the Flood of Noah's day. If the

earth experienced one cataclysmic interruption in its natural processes, he reasons, it could surely experience another.

Having mentioned the Flood, Peter briefly contemplates life in that time. Have you ever thought about what the earth, and life on it, was like in Noah's day? Or in Adam's day after the introduction of sin and the expulsion from the garden? Surely that period must have been radically different from the present heaven-and-earth cosmos. Peter implies as much in verse 6, calling it "the world that then existed." That "world" existed for some 1,650 years.¹ What was it like? Based on Scripture and scientific discoveries, here are some features of that "world that then existed":

METEOROLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE PRE-FLOOD WORLD:

- There would be a vast layer of water vapor in the upper atmosphere (implied in Genesis 1:6, "the waters above the firmament"). This water would necessarily be in the form of vapor, since it remained suspended and stars were visible through it (Genesis 1:14-18). This layer is not there now. Why? It likely furnished the water for the 40-day rainfall at the beginning of the Flood. Genesis 7:11 speaks of "the windows of heaven" being opened as the Flood began. The presence of this vast water vapor layer prior to the Flood would cause several conditions to prevail, such as:
 - A universally warm climate over the whole earth, because of a "greenhouse effect" caused by the vapor layer acting as a blanket over the world.
 - No weather fronts, storms, tornadoes, hurricanes, snow, or ice.
 - Little or no rainfall before the Flood. Genesis 2:5-6 says "For the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground." It's likely that this condition prevailed until the Flood. This would help explain why so few people believed Noah's warning of rain--they had never seen it.

¹ By adding up the ages of the patriarchs given in Genesis 5 and 11, a 17th century scholar named Ussher calculated that there were 1,656 years from Adam to the Flood.

- No rainbows before the Flood (Genesis 9:13 implies that the appearance of a rainbow after the Flood was a new phenomenon).
- No distinct seasons (Genesis 8:22 seems to speak of seasons as a new climatological feature).
- Atmospheric pressure (currently 14.7 lbs/sq inch) would be much greater before the Flood due to the weight of the water vapor.

GEOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE PRE-FLOOD WORLD:

- Because of the greenhouse effect, there would be lush vegetation over the entire planet. This would explain why we find tropical plant fossils in arctic regions.
- Little or no volcanic or tectonic activity. (The “breaking up of the fountains of the deep” in Genesis 7:11 suggests that the earth was geologically “quiet” up to that point.)
- Little or no erosion.
- No or few fossils. (Fossil formation requires catastrophic death and sudden burial of life forms, conditions the Flood would obviously satisfy.)
- No large uplifts. Mountains would be much smaller than those today (see Genesis 7:19).
- Sea level would be much lower than today, since the water vapor layer had not fallen as rain and vast quantities of water were being stored underground (see Genesis 7:11).

BIOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE PRE-FLOOD WORLD:

- Animals and men would or could be larger than today, due to the protective vapor layer, increased lifespans, and abundant food supply. (Scientists have found fossil remains of giant animals, plants, and people.) Genesis 6:4 confirms: “There were giants on the earth in those days....”

- Lifespans would be much longer than today, again due to the protective effects of the vapor shield. This would explain the extreme lifespans of the pre-Flood people listed in Genesis 5 and 11. Increased atmospheric pressure (see above) would also contribute to longer lifespans, as would “residual perfection” from Eden (even after death and decay entered the world, it took Adam 930 years to die, Genesis 5:5).

CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL FEATURES OF THE PRE-FLOOD WORLD:

- People lived longer (see above) and were more procreative (Noah fathered three sons after age 500--Genesis 5:32).
- Harmful genetic mutations had not yet developed, so close relatives could (and did) marry each other (Genesis 4:17, 5:4).
- There would be rapid advances in technology due to the longer lifespans and residual perfection. Far from being primitive “cave men,” pre-Flood people invented or excelled in:
 - Astronomy (Genesis 1:14)
 - Agriculture (Genesis 4:2)
 - Animal husbandry (Genesis 4:2, 5:20)
 - Architecture and city building (Genesis 4:17)
 - Music (Genesis 4:21)
 - Metallurgy (Genesis 4:22)
 - Shipbuilding (Genesis 6:14)
- Wickedness, rebellion, and sin were rampant (Genesis 6:5).

I hope you have noticed that these pre-Flood conditions, implied or directly stated in the Biblical record, adequately explain many or most of the physical manifestations we see in the world today, such as fossils, evidences of a warm worldwide climate at some time in the past, fantastic mountain and rock formations suggesting a watery origin, etc. These explanations are reinforced when we briefly consider...

SOME AFTEREFFECTS OF THE GENESIS FLOOD

- The oceans would be much more extensive in area, since after the Flood they contained all the waters which were once “above the firmament” as well as the waters from “the fountains of the deep” (subterranean reservoirs).
- The land areas would be less extensive than before the Flood, with a large percentage of the land uninhabitable (deserts, polar regions, steep terrain, etc.).
- The vapor canopy that was once above the atmosphere would be gone, so storms, rain, and snow would occur.
- Extensive mountain ranges would cover large portions of the earth.²
- The environment would be much more hostile because of harmful radiation from space, as well as harsh climate conditions. This would result in a marked decrease in human life spans.
- Because of the sudden disappearance of the protective atmospheric vapor layer, tremendous glaciers and ice sheets would exist for a time after the Flood, possibly for hundreds of years. (The Ice Ages?)
- The retreat of the waters and the rise in land masses would result in land bridges between continents; enabling rapid dispersion of people and animals all over the world.
- The crust of the earth would be in a general state of instability for a long time, reflected in recurrent volcanic activity and earthquakes, which continue even to the present day.

² Genesis 8:3 states that after the Flood, the waters decreased continually for several months, implying that mountain uplifts were causing flood waters to drain to the oceans. There is a likely reference to this in the Psalms: “He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they [the waters] fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.” (Psalms 104:5-9, ESV)

- The land would be barren of vegetation until plants could re-establish themselves. Processes of erosion, sedimentation, and lithification (rock formation) would be speeded up, resulting in the rapid formation of fossils and coal/oil beds.
- The sharp changes in temperatures after the Flood, combined with the lack of vegetation, would result in the extinction of highly specialized or unusually large animals such as dinosaurs.³
- Rainbows, which were evidently nonexistent before the Flood because there was no rain (Genesis 2:5), would be regularly seen after the Flood (Genesis 9:13-14).
- The present water cycle (evaporation, clouds, rain) would begin to operate.
- Distinct seasons and cycles of cold and heat would commence (Genesis 8:22).
- There would be extensive geological evidence of a worldwide Flood, including vast areas of water-laid sediments and rocks, deep canyons, marine fossils on mountaintops, large coal and oil deposits, and fossil “graveyards.”
- Memories of the Flood would be passed down from generation to generation, explaining the presence of “flood myths” even in pagan civilizations.

CONCLUSION

The Biblical record of the Flood is one of the most scorned, rejected, and ridiculed portion of Scripture. I hope this brief study, aside from just being fascinating in itself, has strengthened your faith in God’s word. Christians do not have to apologize for or try to explain away the Flood account. It explains the fossil record, the geological features of earth, the history of mankind, and the reality and

³ The dinosaurs must have lived with people during pre-Flood times and perhaps afterwards, making patriarchal life pretty exciting to say the least. Some possible references to dinosaurs in the book of Job are Job 7:12, 40:15-24, and 41:1-34.

consequences of sin far better than the theory of evolution. An article in the monthly journal Reason and Revelation puts it aptly: “...(I)t appears that those within the atheistic community have been somewhat successful in planting seeds of doubt, as once-faithful Christians find themselves questioning a story they have known and believed since childhood. [Our purpose] is to root out and destroy permanently those seeds of doubt and to reassure Christians that the events of Genesis 6-8 happened exactly as Moses recorded them thousands of years ago.” (Brad Harrub and Bert Thompson, Reason and Revelation, December 2004)

Peter was so sure of the reality of the Flood that he used it as proof that the Lord will return one day and put a permanent end to this physical sphere. Let us have that assurance and confidence also. --John Temples