



Haaretz

After Them, the Deluge

Little solid ground underlies the hypotheses of the authors about the scientific nature of the biblical story of the flood.



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The large and tireless body of "flood hunters" is divided into two main camps: There are those who believe that only the ark can serve as evidence of the credibility of the biblical story of Noah and his sons, which they believe is the most important thing. The literature describing the unproductive searches for the ark on Mount Ararat in the past 100 years has taught us that these "hunters" include naive people with much imagination and a tendency toward fabrication.

On the other hand, the second camp – those who seek evidence that shows that sometime in the very distant past, there was a catastrophic event on Earth in the form of a flood – is divided into two subgroups separated by a vast chasm. The

scale; the other tries to prove that there was a cosmic event that changed the face of the planet in its entirety. If the reference is to a local, natural occurrence, it is sufficient to find archaeological proof of the fact that a disaster like a large flood took place in a specific region. But if we are talking about a cosmic event, it is necessary, for example, to specify a dramatic change that took place in the stars and their orbits.

Together with the above-mentioned camps, there is another large and no less important one: of those who wish to prove by signs and wonders that the biblical story about Noah is true, and who can offer explanations for every detail of it.

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It's quite obvious that, more than any other myth, the various versions of the story of the biblical flood, the metamorphoses it has undergone and its different interpretations have, since the 17th century, given rise to a "flood" of books, most of them bizarre. There is also research-related literature about the fascinating history of the relentless attempts to prove that the phenomenon of the flood does not contradict the laws of nature, or that it was an historic event. (See, for example, Norman Cohn's "Noah's Flood - The Genesis Story in Western Thought"; 1996.) From this point of view, we are talking about a microcosm subsuming a very large number of components of both Jewish and Christian intellectual history.



It has been said that the book by Ryan and Pitman (first published in 1998, and now translated into Hebrew) builds a bridge between myth and science, but it appears to do so in an artificial way. Had the authors intended it to be a geological study whose aim was to explain a catastrophic event - involving the flooding of the Mediterranean Sea, whose rising waters broke through the straits of the Bosphorus to create the Black Sea some 8,000 years ago - and had they sufficed with their scientific achievements, their theory would have been discussed mainly among scientists. However, the message spread by the authors was not merely that "we have found when and how the Black Sea was created," but rather, and most prominently, "we have found the flood" that is described in Mesopotamian writings and in the Book of Genesis.

In 1929, British archaeologist Sir Charles Leonard Woolley announced similar, exciting news to the world: "We have found the flood in the royal tombs of Ur [of the Chaldeans]." Ryan and Pitman informed the world that the flood had not taken place in southern Mesopotamia, but rather to the north, and that its memory had been imprinted in the minds of the local inhabitants for some 2,000 years, since it indeed was "a true story about the destruction that happened on Earth" - that is, massive destruction and not a seasonal flood, however serious that could be.



passed down from generation to generation in stories sung and recited during ceremonies "around the village campfire and in the caravans," until they were put down in writing, describing how one family was saved from the disaster and from whom all persons were descended. A cute theory, one must admit, that was invented to serve as a bridge over the approximately 2,000 years that divided the above-mentioned natural event, based on the early Sumerian version of the flood, and the more modern version of the story.

The theory about the creation of the Black Sea, therefore, is merely the bottom layer on which the two geologists built a second one, according to which that region was a major center for a developed, flourishing Neolithic rural population. This population was forced to flee with its possessions - knowledge, tools and culture - and it was the moving force behind the cultural development of southeastern Europe, Anatolia, Egypt and Mesopotamia (refugees from the Black Sea were the forefathers of the Sumerians). In other words, the Black Sea region was a kind of paradise and its flooding led to the wandering of peoples who spread their highly developed culture over the world.

At this point, the two geologists entered a research field with which they were not familiar and chose assumptions which seemed to fit their theory. Their reconstruction is based on conclusions that do not have solid proof. (No evidence has been found of the existence of a large, developed Neolithic



settlement around the Black Sea, and well-publicized marine studies have not revealed the remnants of an ancient settlement at the bottom of the Black Sea - rather, at the most, a bit of wood from a shipwrecked Byzantine boat).

In any case, the theory postulated by Ryan and Pitman is a matter for scientists, and our interest lies mainly with the third layer, which is intended to assure that their book will be a best-seller. The authors include a key for understanding the materials on which the various versions of the flood story were based, until being adapted by the author/s of the Book of Genesis and being turned by subsequent generations into one of the most popular of all biblical stories - which has accounted for the greatest number of commentaries of all kinds.

Can a believer rely on Ryan and Pitman's theory as unambiguous scientific proof that there was such a flood? Such a conclusion would be problematic, according to the authors, because the description of the flood in Genesis is a "reincarnation" of a Mesopotamian story that predates it by a long time, because Noah and his three sons are mythological figures and, the main point: The flood was a natural event and not a punishment from God (there is anyway no rationale for trying to find the ark on Mount Ararat). However, the value of the biblical story does not lie in its being a very distant echo of a natural disaster. From the religious point of view, the main point of it lies in the description of God's intervention in the natural order of things, after which the world was recreated (since "the Almighty creates and destroys worlds according to his will"). Therefore, not only is it not necessary to prove that this divine intervention occurred with respect to the laws of nature: Making a claim of this kind is tantamount to heresy.

In 1698, John Keill, a professor of astronomy at Oxford University, called those who suggested naturalistic and scientific explanations for the flood "flood-makers" and said they had lent a hand to heresy. They demonstrated a lack of trust in the ability of God to change the world order at will. Some 200 years later, a similar thought was expressed by Nehemia Dov Hoffman, author of "Nature Stories." Those who do not have the Torah, he wrote, have only what the Torah tells us about the world and God.



However, the desire to prove the existence of the flood was, and still is, stronger than any relevant and well-founded claim, and the book under review is a case in point. At the same time, this desire has a dynamic, flexible and versatile character. It knows how to adapt itself easily to changing scientific theories and to prove that there is apparently no contradiction between the bases of belief and the preeminent theory at hand. The result of this incessant effort, as Don Cameron Allen so logically expressed it in his book, "The Legend of Noah" (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1949), is that the more support the Bible gets from science, the more need there is to defend it.

Prof. Yossi Mart of the University of Haifa, who in 2005 headed the research team dispatched to the Black Sea that confirmed the theory presented by the authors, wrote in an appendix to the Hebrew translation that Ryan and Pitman created "a rare dialogue between the culture of science and the culture of the arts and the humanities, and bridged the deep gulf between them." In actual fact, the book reveals the gulf between empirical scientific research (in the first part), and the assumptions and speculation cloaked in literary terms (in the second part), with which the two distinguished geologists proposed a historical reconstruction without supporting evidence.

It is possible that this blurring of the fields stems from the desire to achieve publicity by means of making a connection between geological theory, and Noah's flood and the Bible. But one has no reason not to believe the enthusiasm of the writers, who both believe that they have "discovered" the flood, and that they have found compatibility between the biblical story and the seminal chapter of the history of the world which, in their opinion, took



melting pot of the flood." According to their description, this region was a Garden of Eden, with a mixture of genes and languages. The writers move easily from geology to oceanography to archaeology to anthropology, to philology as well as to mythography.

There is also a positive side to this attempt, since the search for "scientific" proof for the story of the Creation and of the second creation (i.e., the flood) was not always an obstacle to conducting scientific research, but in many cases was actually an incentive for it. Fundamentalists will perhaps be led astray in this case as well and will derive pleasure and encouragement from the theory expounded by Ryan and Pitman, but the question of whether their theory has any validity belongs solely to the realm of scientific research.

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