

## TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

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Russell Crowe:

A great flood is coming. We build a vessel to survive the storm. We build an ark.

John Dickson:

Russell Crowe doesn't need to say any more than a handful of words and already most of us know what he's talking about. It's the story of Noah's ark, the flood that destroys everything and the one family that survives. And that was a clip from the 2014 movie simply called Noah, a strange and rather messy epic. And I think it's fair to say everyone agrees the original book is better. It's one of the most famous and controversial stories in the Bible, of course. In some ways, the biblical story of Noah and his ark has been the focus over centuries for debates about the trustworthiness of the Bible.

The account has captured the imagination of archaeologists and historians and theologians, some of whom have spent a lot of years trying to find evidence for a worldwide flood or a giant wooden boat with no luck. Then there are the discoveries of modern science, as well as an explosion in new knowledge about the ancient world of the Bible. And these have challenged whether a concrete reading of the story is plausible. But if it's not straightforward history, what on earth is it? And what does that say about the Bible itself? I'm John Dickson. And this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Global Christianity: A Guide to the World's Largest Religion* from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe by Gina Zurlo. Each episode of Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out. And if this one hour of undeceiving isn't enough for you, join the Undeceptions Plus community for just \$5 Aussie a month.

You'll get extended interviews with my guests, bonus episodes, exclusive Facebook live events with me and the team and tons of other extras. Just go to [undeceptions.com/plus](https://undeceptions.com/plus). John, can you give us a quick rundown of the story of the flood in Genesis, picking out what you see as the key narrative elements, because not everyone of my listeners will even know the story.

John Walton:

Right? Well, as you might expect, the story of a flood involves a event of nature, a catastrophe. And in this particular story of the flood, there is the instruction to one particular man to build a boat, to collect animals and that he'll be saved while the rest of the world will not be. That's the basic story. And so Noah and his family.

John Dickson:

That's John Walton, one of the best known Old Testament scholars in the world. He's professor of Old Testament in the graduate school at Wheaton College, Illinois. He's the author or senior editor of more than 30 books, mainly focused on the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern context. The book relevant for today's episode is the one he wrote with another Old Testament scholar and theologian, Tremper Longman. Hi, Tremp, if you're listening. It's called *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology and the Deluge Debate*.

John Walton:

And so Noah and his family and some animals are spared this catastrophe and they come off the boat once the earth dries out and he offers a sacrifice of thanks. But, really, part of the story and perhaps the most important part of it is the setting. That is, it's in a setting of corruption and violence among humankind. And the catastrophe is destruction of that known world. It's not presented as a piece of punishment, although it's often interpreted that way. But it's rather presented as a restoration of order. So that's part of the kind of narrative plot as well that's really important beyond the details of the hero and the boat and the animals and the flood.

John Dickson:

The story of Noah and his ark is in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. You can just turn to chapters six through nine. If you've never read the opening pages of Genesis, here's a quick rundown of what happens before Noah arrives on the scene. God makes the universe, of course, as well as Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, even though they're told not to, and God throws them out of the Garden of Eden into an unruly world.

The next few chapters show the ripple effects of human disobedience and we read more stories of human rebellion and fractured relationships. It's the story of humans moving east of Eden, both narratively and figuratively. There's the story of Cain and Abel, for example, where Cain, in a jealous rage, murders his brother, Abel. Humans then continue the violence on a grander scale, building kingdoms full of corruption. And that's where the Noah story begins, in Genesis chapter six.

Speaker 4:

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

John Dickson:

So God decided to start over, saving only a few. Now, John Walton's point about the destruction of humanity not being a punishment, but rather a restoration of order, may sound strange to our ears. I mean, it certainly looks like punishment. Just about everyone dies. Now in his book, Walton concedes that punishment is the traditional interpretation, but he sees things a little differently and in a way that isn't necessarily mutually exclusive.

And I think his reading makes a lot of sense. Genesis opens with a watery chaos in the first lines- out of which God brings the order of creation. And then this same theme weaves its way through the first portion of the book of Genesis. First, the non order in the world. Then, the order that God brings to the world. Then there's human disorder followed by a reordering and renewal. The flood is about God re-establishing order.

It is, in a sense, forward looking. Seeing the flood simply as punishment only looks backwards, but forward looking is also important, especially important in Genesis. It sets things up for the rest of the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible, frankly, where we learn how God intends to re-establish order. It turns out it's through God choosing one family, Abraham's family, and using them to bless the entire world. We'll get to that later in the episode. My point is there's this repeated motif in the book of Genesis. Non-order followed by order, then disorder, then order. And it comes up a lot in my chat with Professor Walton.

Irving Finkle:

Once cuneiform is deciphered, lots of unexpected things came to light, but probably none which had greater impact than the discovery by George Smith in 1872 of the 11th tablet of the epic of Gilgamesh, in which he encountered for the first time the flood story.

Speaker 6:

Finding an ancient tablet with the story of Noah's ark written hundreds of years before the Bible shattered the Victorian's understanding of the world.

Irving Finkle:

When it arrived, it was a huge bang thing like that. It was a very explosive matter. And the parallel was much more than a sort of general similarity with a boat and water and animals. It was in the same order and there were many close points that compellingly showed that this same story had been current in Mesopotamia a millennium before the earliest date when the Hebrew text is likely to have come into existence.

John Dickson:

That's a clip from a BBC Ideas 2021 special in the UK, looking at four ancient secrets revealed by deciphered cuneiform tablets. Cuneiform, by the way, is one of the oldest known forms of writing. It

means wedge-shaped, from the Latin [foreign language 00:09:56] or wedge. People wrote cuneiform using a reed stylus cut to make a wedge-shaped mark on a clay tablet. Just Google it and you'll see what I mean. It's little wedges in different angles that mean words. Anyway, in the BBC tape Irving Finkel and serologist from the British museum tells us about the museum's single most famous cuneiform text, the 11th tablet of the epic of Gilgamesh.

In 1872, British museum assistant George Smith announced an amazing discovery. He had deciphered the story of a flood written on a cuneiform tablet that had been recently excavated at Ninevah in present day Iraq. The news was electrifying. Those present at Smith's announcement to a meeting of the Society of Biblical Archaeology in London included the then Archbishop of Canterbury and the UK prime minister. It was a big deal. As Irving Finkel points out in his own book, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood*, almost everyone in 19th century England knew their Bible backwards. The suggestion that the iconic story of Noah's ark was not an original, but a cover was, as Finkel put it, indigestible. More recently, Finkel himself was able to decipher another cuneiform tablet dating from a similar time. The symbols read as a virtual instruction manual for building an ark and include a recounting of animals, two by two, on the ark.

The tablet fragment itself is only the size of a mobile phone, but it contains details that make this epic of Gilgamesh, as it's called, even more similar to the Biblical account, even though the clay tablet describes the ark as either circular or a cube, whereas the Bible makes the ark a giant oblong. The final form of the epic of Gilgamesh probably dates to the late second millennium BC, so something like 12 or 1300 BC, which is about the same time as Moses actually. But there are other flood stories from the ancient Near East that are likely much, much older than that. Can you tell us about the other great flood stories and maybe, in turn, these are the stories from the surrounding cultures, the Eridu Genesis, Atrahasis and the Gilgamesh Epic.

John Walton:

Yes. Well, Eridu Genesis is a little bit of a an outlier because there is not a single piece called the Eridu Genesis. Rather, it's a modern scholarly composite of several different traditions pasted together.

John Dickson:

Scholar's good at that.

John Walton:

Yes. But in that, one segment of that is an old Sumerian account of Zia sutra, a flood story. But in this, even this composite Eridu Genesis, the flood is just a dozen lines. There's not really much to it and it's got the basic elements of the boat, the hero, the flood.

Speaker 4:

All the evil winds, all stormy winds gathered into one and with them then the flood was sweeping over the cities of the half bushel baskets for seven days and seven nights. After the flood had swept over the country, after the evil wind had tossed the big boat about on the great waters, the sun came out, spreading light over heaven and earth.

John Dickson:

Do we know its general date?

John Walton:

Well, we only know the date of some of the documents that lead to it, which is often the difficulty in the ancient world. With Atrahasis, it's a little more extensive and also the date is a little more identifiable, but, again, here we're talking about maybe 1600 BC, but that's the date of the manuscript we have. How old those traditions are, we don't know. The Gilgamesh Epic didn't find its final form until closer to the end of the second millennium. And it's dependent on the Atrahasis Epic. That is, it uses the flood account from that. Nevertheless, the Atrahasis Epic and the Gilgamesh Epic really have different perspectives, different understandings of the flood, different settings that they place it into. So even though they're literarily dependent, they're very different ways of thinking about the flood and seeing what its consequences are.

John Dickson:

These various flood stories also contain creation accounts. Typically, in this ancient Near East Eastern setting, humans are created as an afterthought. In the hierarchy of the gods, the lesser gods end up getting fed up with all the work they have to do for the higher gods, so humans are created as a kind of slave creature to do the work the gods didn't want to do. The problem is, in the Atrahasis Epic, humans breed like crazy and as their populations grow, they become noisy and annoying, and the gods decide to wipe out humanity in a flood. But one of the gods, Enki, doesn't like that plan and take steps to prevent every human dying. He appears to the human Atrahasis in a dream and warns him, "Listen to me. Read wall, pay attention to all my words. Flee the house, build a boat, forsake possessions and save life."

Then there's the Gilgamesh Epic. Gilgamesh is the king of the city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia. He's immature and, frankly, not a great king. We'll put a link to the story in the show notes, but basically Gilgamesh wants to know how to attain eternal life. And so he goes to the one man who is immortal, Utanapishtim. In this Gilgamesh Epic it's Utanapishtim that is our flood hero, our Noah.

He tells Gilgamesh of the backstory that led to his eternal existence. He'd been told by the God Ea that the gods were going to destroy everything. And so he was commanded by Ea to "forsake possessions, seek life, build an ark and save life", which sounds pretty similar to the Atrahasis Epic. Anyway, Utanapishtim is also told to take aboard ship seed of all living things. He obeyed and saved himself and others from the ruin of the gods and his reward was eternal life.

Now in his book, John Walton notes that perhaps the most remarkable similarity to the Biblical account is at the end of the flood in the Gilgamesh Epic, Utanapishtim's ark came to rest on a mountain. And after seven days, he released three birds: a dove, which found no perch and so returned, a swallow, which likewise couldn't find a perch, and then a raven, which saw the waters receding, ate, and didn't come back. Sounds familiar, right? Here's how the Bible ends the flood story.

Speaker 4:

After 40 days, Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth. So it returned to Noah in the ark. He waited seven more days and, again, sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. Genesis 8:6-11.

John Dickson:

But the details of the story Atrahasis, it sounds like the Noah story in some ways.

John Walton:

Sure. Zia sutra, in the Sumerian one, is the flood hero. Atrahasis is the flood hero and Utanapishtim now, in the Gilgamesh Epic, is the flood hero. None of those are really their names. They are names that indicate their significance and their status, the one who brings life and the one who found wisdom and things like that. So, again, the names have significance, but they're not really treated as historical people, per se. They're part of this account traditions. Remember also that, in the ancient world, most of tradition is being passed down orally. So it's a hearing dominant world. And, therefore, the idea of documents circulating is not the right way to think about how things happened.

John Dickson:

No. So the Atrahasis is 1600 BC, you say, or thereabouts. I mean, that predates Moses, clearly.

John Walton:

Yes. Yes.

John Dickson:

And the oral tradition predates that by a long shot. Some Christians might say that Genesis must be the source of these stories and then sceptics reply, "No, no, no. The Bible is just copying. It's a copycat." What do you say to both that Christian, nervous Christian perhaps, and the grumpy sceptic?

John Walton:

Well, both views, I think, are overly simplistic because they assume the prominence and prevalence of written traditions being circulated and transmitted culture to culture. And that's not what we find. Instead, each of the accounts, whether it's the biblical one or Atrahasis, they're all drawing from an oral cultural river. These ideas are out there circulating. And each one draws that basic understanding of an event, which, again, everybody in the ancient world knew of such an event. Each one draws that event and then gives interpretation of it.

John Dickson:

This is important. It doesn't phase Walton at all that there are other earlier sources that give us similar account to the story of the flood we read in the Bible. And that's got a lot to do with the way he reads the book of Genesis, which we'll get to soon.

John Walton:

And so, in that sense, it's not like we have a direct line of transmission, of documents, of literary reflections from one culture to another. We know that even as early as the judges' period, the Israelites knew of the Gilgamesh Epic because there's a fragment of it found at Megiddoh from the judges' period. But still that would connect more to the scribal schools. And what the scribes are, they're learning their craft by copying documents. But still what Israelites would've known of the flood came out of this what I call the cultural river.

John Dickson:

This cultural river, as John Walton calls it, provided the ancient Near East with its shared assumptions. It's the water everyone swam in. Assumptions like the comprehensive and ubiquitous control of the gods, the role of kingship, divination, seeing into the future, the centrality of a temple and the reality of the spirit world. All of these things informed the worldview or cultural river of the ancient Near East. Our cultural river today, obviously, is very different. It includes currents like human rights, capitalism, democracy, science, and so on. So then can you put your finger on the core narrative that is shared? What are the core bits that, if you pick up the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis six to nine, you'll find?

John Walton:

Right. And, again, it's basically the elements that there's some kind of problem that the gods are perceiving and then the flood as an action to resolve that problem. And so the boat and the flood and someone who is spared. But there's differences because, for instance, the Mesopotamian traditions, there is no intention of the gods to spare somebody. One of the gods kind of went his own way and tipped their hand and that's why someone was saved. So even in that basic element, there's quite a bit of difference.

John Dickson:

I mean, that's in some ways, unless I'm overreading it, a bit of an insight into the pagan religion. The fickleness of the gods.

John Walton:

Right.

John Dickson:

The gods may care for you, may not.

John Walton:

In those traditions, people had been created to meet the needs of the gods and it somehow escaped the god's notice that if they wiped out humanity, there'd be nobody left to meet their needs. And so after seven days of a flood, they're really, really hungry. And so it turns out, wow, it was a good thing after all that somebody was spared to offer a sacrifice and feed them. Obviously a very different perspective than in the Biblical account.

John Dickson:

Walton says that the Bible's account is less about revealing the narrative itself, which just seems to be a shared story in the ancient Near East, and more about how to interpret the meaning of this shared flood story. The Biblical author is making some theological arguments, saying something specific about the Jewish currents in the great cultural river, rather than telling a straightforward history. So does that mean there was no flood? Not exactly. Stick with us.

This episode is sponsored by Zondervan Academic's new book, *Global Christianity: A Guide to the World's Largest Religion from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe* by Gina Zurlo. This book is a huge undertaking. It offers insight into Christian life from every corner of the world. It's full of quick reference maps and charts with the latest demographic information for every country. It's got research from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity on the number of Christians, what they believe and some of the forces they're reckoning with in their particular environment.

Gina Zurlo is a world Christianity scholar and demographer. And, actually, we're speaking to her in an upcoming episode. I reckon you're going to love it. Did you know, for example, that there are more Christians living in the global south, that's Africa, Asia, and Latin America, than in Europe and North America? And did you know it's been that way since the 1980s? Did you also know that the typical Christian in the world today is a black woman? Understanding Christianity in its global context offers invaluable insight into this world's largest religion, a religion that despite what we hear in the news is growing and thriving. You can order *Global Christianity* from Amazon, as I have done, or head to [zondervan.com](http://zondervan.com) for more information.



In Tanzania, over a third of girls are married before the age of 18. It's often because there aren't many other options. Almost 70% of children aged 14 to 17 in the country aren't enrolled in secondary education and in a culture that doesn't highly value women, school is a really low priority for them. It's considered much more useful for a girl to be managing the home than traveling the often long distances to go to school, so they're pushed to be a homemaker as soon as possible.

Anglican Aid is working to prevent this with local Christians, in Tarime, in the Mara region of Tanzania. What they're doing is offering local young women an alternative. They want to build the Tarime Girls Secondary School, which when complete will offer places to about 800 girls, giving them the opportunity to complete their secondary education, keeping them at school and avoiding young marriages. You can help Anglican Aid in this important work, valuing women and championing education. It's an organization I really trust. Go to [Anglicanaid.org.au](http://Anglicanaid.org.au) to give today.

Speaker 7:

There was a huge issue of what is this ark going to look like? The idea was let's go back to what God tells Noah in the Bible.

Speaker 8:

In Genesis, the dimensions of the ark are laid out 30 cubits high by 50 cubits wide by 300 cubits long. A cubit is roughly the dimension of your elbow to your forefinger.

Speaker 13:

What is this?

Russell Crowe:

This is our ark.

Speaker 8:

It's basically-

John Dickson:

That's the director of the 2014 film Noah, Darren Aronofsky and his production designer, Mark Friedberg. They're talking about how they built the set for this epic film. And that set included a 55-foot tall, 85-foot wide and 165-foot long ark, roughly the same size as a 50-meter Olympic swimming pool. They then extended it digitally to bring it up to the Bible's 500-foot ark, which is the length of three Olympic pools.

There have also been some much larger efforts to recreate the biblical ark in its true proportions. In Kentucky, in the U.S., the well-known creationist, Ken Ham has built a biblical sized ark. It's a kind of educational theme park. I have friends involved and they may eventually convince me to visit. I think it'd be fun. I imagine our discussions about the Bible would also be fun.

Then there's a full scale ark replica in Hong Kong, which is also a hotel. I've been there. And then there's the half-sized one in the Netherlands that actually floats. These are all modern attempts to reimagine the Biblical story. But alongside the imagination, there are sciencey questions to ask. So let's move to the science, which is everyone's second question, if not the first. Given that geology doesn't really support a worldwide global flood and biology and zoology don't really support the descent of all living things to just one family of each, is this one of those famous clashes where you've got to choose between Bible and science?

John Walton:

Well, it's often perceived as that, but to some extent that's based on an assumption that the Biblical text is presenting sort of a scientific historical perspective, which we have to be very careful with. And to recognize that the Biblical text does not intend to give a scientific description and therefore to try to reconstruct a particular scientific description is highly interpretive rather than something that's simply inherent at a flat reading of the text. And so in that sense, we have to recognize things like the rhetoric of hyperbole, that this is a rhetorical device that's demonstrably used other places in Scripture and I think is available here as well.

John Dickson:

This is where I have to ask for the patience of any listeners who are young earth creationists listening out there in the world or maybe here in the studio with me who see the flood narrative as a factual historical account. I've learned over the years that there are some very smart cookies who read the story that way and they have answers to all of the scientific and literary and theological challenges.

All I can say is I find myself persuaded by the approach of scholars like John Walton, Tremper Longman, and a host of other Biblical and ancient Near Eastern experts. The text itself, they point out, was never intended to be read like, say, the historical narratives of the Biblical kings or whatever. It's a different kind of literature entirely. Yeah. So you don't mean they were just telling a tall tale.

John Walton:

No. No.

John Dickson:

Exaggeration in the moral sense.

John Walton:

Correct.

John Dickson:

It's an actual literary device.

John Walton:

Right. A literary device meant to get at something else. And so, therefore, not exactly trying to inform the reader that, "Hey, there was a flood." Everybody reading this in the ancient world knew there was a flood. And so it's really more about God's reasons for the flood and what was going on with the flood. It's like we might today say, "Well, everybody knows there was a Holocaust, but why? What was going on? Why would God allow it?" And so the questions are very much God-oriented, not reconstruct this event-oriented.

John Dickson:

So how much of the Genesis flood story do you take to be real events or is that not even possible given the literary theological overlay?

John Walton:

Well, I don't want to say it's impossible, but likewise it would be difficult to identify that core because, again, it's couched in literary and theological rhetoric. And, therefore, again, I accept there was a massive flood that was highly destructive and not everybody was killed. And so the idea that they were spared in a boat, that they saved some animals, I consider that a core of reality.

John Dickson:

Plenty of effort has gone into finding evidence of a worldwide flood to no avail. Yet in 1996, two marine geologists from Columbia University advanced a theory that does fit with the science. A flood of water from the Mediterranean, with the force of 20 Niagara Falls, rushed through the narrow natural strait now called the Bosphorus in north-western Turkey and entered into the Black Sea, some 7,600 years ago. The Black Sea rose and inundated the surrounding plains, becoming roughly what it is today.

These geologists said that this cataclysmic event could have inspired the Babylonian flood stories like the Epic of Gilgamesh a few thousand years later and the Biblical story in the centuries after that. Now that's not exactly what John Walton or his co-author Tremper Longman say in their book on the topic, but they do reckon it's the sort of pre-historical event that might have inspired all of the ancient Near Eastern flood stories. And the Bible's version, they believe, is a kind of theological riff on this universal oral tradition.

I feel really comfortable with this approach to the early chapters of Genesis because it's clear that the material in Genesis chapters one to 11 has the ring of theologizing about universal history, rather than recounting known events in the history of Israel. That seems to kick in around chapter 12 of Genesis in the story of Abraham. Professors Walton and Longman and tons of others see the early chapters of Genesis as theological history. There are real events being referred to, the creation of the world, the fall of humanity and a devastating flood. But the events are told in a highly figurative manner to make theological points about humanity, the world, and the course of history.

And actually a similar point is made about the final chapters of the Bible, in the book of Revelation. There the author uses highly figurative elements to speak not about pre-history, but about the climax of history. For example, all Christians believe Jesus will return to judge the world. That's going to be a real event in the world, but few Christians think Jesus is actually going to come back riding on a glorious white horse with a sword coming out of his mouth as Revelation chapter 19 describes it. These are figurative elements to make a theological point about Jesus being victorious, simply with a word from his mouth. Anyway, sorry, we've strayed a bit from Genesis.

John Walton:

But too often, I think, when we read the Bible, we think too much about what would the videotape have shown? What would it be like to be there in reality? And to some extent that's because we have adopted the view that reality equals what a videotape could show, which I think is a flawed and faulty view and certainly not the way that ancient literature is working. So to that extent, I think there are real events at the core, but the focus of the text is not the event. It's what this well known event was all about.

John Dickson:

Yeah. I want to get to that. What are the clues in the text of Genesis six to nine that this is not intended as straightforward history, that there's a higher level of meaning the author wants to draw you into?

John Walton:

Yeah, I think that comes in the very nature of the presentation, although that gets a little more difficult to spot if you're not familiar with how ancient literature works and the conventions they used and the rhetorical devices they used.

John Dickson:

This is why we give people like you a job.

John Walton:

Well, and that's what we try to bring out for people to see. When we see the obvious parallels between the flood story and the creation story, when we see the obvious parallels to the flood story and accounts of the exile, we can start to see the patterning, the literary patterning, that is taking place.

John Dickson:

Yes, people often overlook the way this fits into Genesis one to 11. Can you talk about the pattern in Genesis one to 11 that then re-emerges in the flood story?

John Walton:

As I read Genesis one through 11 and, of course, lots of people read it in different ways, but as I read it, the main concern is God's establishment of order, which begins with creation in Genesis one and how humans worked to center themselves in that order spectrum instead of working alongside of God in his plans and purposes for order, and he created them in his image to do that, to work alongside him.

Instead, they decided we're going to go into business on our own. We're going to do it our way. We're going to make it benefit us. And so that's how I understand Genesis three. So wisdom is the pathway to order. They take from the wisdom tree so that they can launch on their own and do their own order thing instead of God's order thing. And so in that sense, Genesis one through 11 is moving through a whole sequence that's eventually going to lead to the covenant in Genesis 12, where God relaunches how he is going to establish order in the world through the covenant.

John Dickson:

Genesis chapter 12, by the way, is where we meet Abraham who's a kind of new Adam. And God promises a return to order in this covenant that Walton is talking about. Abraham is the historical key to blessing on the world, which is the reversal of the chaos and curse that has marked the universal prehistory.

Speaker 4:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

John Walton:

So the flood narrative stands in the middle of this Genesis one through 11 section to give the primary evidence of what happens when people take order on themselves. It doesn't lead to order. It leads to corruption, it leads to violence and it leads to destruction. People just can't do it on their own. Sure, they can build cities. Genesis four. Sure, they can engage in the arts of civilization, music and domestication of animals and bronze-working. Genesis 4. Sure, you can make some progress, but in the end, you really can't bring order. You can bring civilization, but order is bigger than civilization.

John Dickson:

Yeah, because order in the Biblical concept is... Well, you're going to correct me if I'm wrong. It's humans participating in the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is imprinted in creation. And so looking to him for wisdom is looking to him to participate in his mind, in the creation.

John Walton:

Correct. To participate in his mind with his plans and purposes in mind. We're not driving our own car and having God as the passenger. We are leaving our driving behind and we are joining the train of God's plans and purposes where he's the conductor and the engineer.

John Dickson:

And you see this in the next story after the flood story, right? The tower of Babel.

John Walton:

Sure. Right.

John Dickson:

And here's the story of the tower of Babel from Genesis chapter 11.

Speaker 4:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in China and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that people were building. The Lord said, "If, as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth. And they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel because there, the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

John Walton:

Because there, again, they're trying to establish order for themselves, making a name for themselves, through their own efforts. Again, the tower is not for people to go up. It's for God to come down. And they want to bring God down to live among them to worship him, but for their own benefits so that their name might be great. And of course, sacred space, presence of God, should be to make his name great.

John Dickson:

The tower of Babel story there in Genesis 11 marks the end of the section of the book of Genesis that Walton sees as the kind of backstory to God's restoration of the world through Abraham. And so when we get to chapter 12, you've already intimated that Abraham is the sort of the renewal of all thing? Am I right? That we can detect a different kind of literature from Genesis 12. Different kinds of patterns?

John Walton:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that it, even though it still uses narrative, it's moved to a different level because now it's dealing with how God chose to establish order instead of in the cosmos through creation in Genesis one, now in society through trying to re-establish relationship, covenant and re-establish presence, tabernacle, temple. And so the covenant is driving toward this idea of God, on his own terms, re-establishing relationship and presence.

John Dickson:

So would you be comfortable thinking of Genesis one to 11 as the preamble or the pre-history even, and from Genesis 12, it is more like historical narrative.

John Walton:

Yes. Again, the term historical narrative always worries me a little bit. It is narrative, certainly. That's a style of writing, but the minute we use the word historical, we've got our own baggage of what constitutes history, how important history is, what are the conventions, what are the aims, et cetera. And none of those are like the ancient world.

John Dickson:

No, indeed. But do you feel we can detect more concreteness of historical memory and culture?

John Walton:

Yes.

John Dickson:

From chapter 20.

John Walton:

Yes. Again, things like Genesis one through 11, even though they talk about events that they would suggest really happened, still they're framed with different ideas in mind.

John Dickson:

Let's press pause. I've got a five minute Jesus for you. Jesus himself, in the gospels, referred to the flood of Genesis and to Noah himself. And some of my friends have pointed out over the years that this is pretty good evidence that Jesus himself believed the story in Genesis was literal, a concrete account of historical events. I'm not so sure.

And it's also worth noting the meaning that Jesus attaches to the flood. It isn't exactly the traditional story of punishment. This passage of teaching I'm referring to comes from the source behind the gospels

known as Q. Now I've mentioned this many times before on the pod. Q is just the abbreviation of the German word [foreign language 00:45:40], meaning source. And it refers to the material that both Luke's gospel and Matthew's gospel have in common with each other. Most experts, for reasons I won't bother going into here, are pretty confident that Matthew and Luke didn't copy each other's material in writing their gospel, so the best explanation of this shared material, this stuff they have in common, is that they're both using an earlier source.

Q is just a collection of Jesus' teachings that was circulating before the gospels were written. Most scholars date it around the year 50. So it's just 20 years after Jesus. That's pretty good in ancient history terms. Anyway, I'm getting distracted by history. Here is the saying of Jesus I'm referring to. I'm going to quote the version in Matthew's gospel. "But about that day or hour, no one knows. Not even the angels of heaven nor the Son of Man, but only the Father." He's referring to his return. "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

That's Matthew 24, if you want to read it in context. Now some of my mates point out that Jesus refers to Noah and the flood in a very matter of fact way. This means, so they reckon, that even if the story in Genesis has the flavour of a literary theological story, Jesus' own reference to the story means that we have to read it concretely. But I'm not so sure. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jesus knew the story to be closer to a parable than to a historical record. How would he have differentiated that in his reference to it in the gospels?

Would he have said, "Just as that parable of Noah entering the ark" et cetera. I doubt it. You would refer to a famous story that was a parable in exactly the same way you'd refer to a story that was factual history. A bit like the way I might say, "I love my darling Buff just as Romeo loved Juliet." There's no reason for me to say, "Just as the fictional character in Shakespeare's play, Romeo, loved the other fictional character in the play, Juliet." You know? It just doesn't make sense. A literary reference just stands on its own. So I reckon there's just no way of telling what exactly Jesus thought of the status of the flood story from a literary reference he makes to it in the gospels. There are other examples of this kind of literary allusion where it's clear the Biblical author makes a literary reference rather than a historical one.

So Jude 14 is an obvious example. Go check that out. So I'm pretty confident that what I'm saying is at least a plausible approach to the story. Jesus is just referring to a well known story and making his own theological point about it. Literary references can be loose in order to make the point. The other example is where Jesus refers to Jonah being "three days and three nights in the belly of a whale". And then Jesus says, "In the same way, I will be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth." He's referring to his burial.



But here's the thing. Jesus certainly wasn't in the tomb for three days and three nights. He wasn't even buried for 48 hours. And that took just two nights. Friday night, Saturday night. So where's the third night? But this isn't a mistake on the part of Jesus or on the part of the gospel writers. After all, they went on to tell the story of Jesus being in the tomb for less than three days, three nights, right?

It's just that a literary allusion like this doesn't have to be precise. It's close enough to say that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection has the same meaning as the story of Jonah, which by the way, was all about saving the people of Ninevah. But that's to get beyond what I want to say here. The other interesting thing is that Jesus happily tells actual parables in the manner of historical narration. Think of the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10. There's no reference to it as a parable. It's not introduced as a parable. Jesus simply starts telling the story. He says, "A man was traveling on the road to Jericho and was attacked." And so on. Now I suppose someone could then say, "Well, that means this particular story is a factual story, not a parable."

But it seems much better to interpret it as a parable since the key point Jesus makes is theological and moral rather than historical. Literary references work in a similar way. Now, to be clear, I do actually think there was a catastrophic pre-historical flood, which different ancient Near Eastern cultures told in different ways and which the Old Testament references in a highly figurative way in order to make a theological point about God's great restoration of all things.

So I just don't think the fact that Jesus refers to the flood and Noah necessarily commits us to reading the Genesis story in a concrete historical way. And I understand some people disagree with me and that's cool. The only other thing worth noting is the way Jesus uses the flood story. Whether or not we think his reference is a literal reference rather than just a literary reference, I find it interesting that Jesus is only interested in one particular point. People were just getting on with their lives when the flood came, but hopefully those listening to Jesus will learn that lesson and be prepared for the day Jesus comes to restore all things.

His own punchline to the story is "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." However you read the story of the flood, this particular teaching of Jesus reminds us not to be simply eating and drinking our way through life, oblivious to ultimate realities. You can press play now. In a nutshell, what message would an informed ancient reader, so let's leave the modern world apart, have got from the Bible's flood story?

John Walton:

Well, basically, if they're reading it in the context of Genesis one through 11, not just a flood story.

John Dickson:

Yes.

John Walton:

Because we don't have just a flood story.

John Dickson:

Yeah.

John Walton:

We've got the context of Genesis one through 11. And so they would see it in this whole sequence, that humans had been created to partner with God as order bringers, but they chose to pursue their own path for their own benefit and, therefore, rather than bring order, they brought corruption and violence. And therefore that God is pushing the reset button to re-establish order. So they would've seen it as having to do with order, not as having to do with crime and punishment. God is going to maintain order and he gave people a long leash and look what happened. They ate the neighbours' roses. Whatever. So, okay, so do over. We're going to start again and recognize then how this can unfold in a different way.

John Dickson:

That's the soundscape from the flood scene in the 1928 Noah's Ark film, which was actually part silent, part talkie. It was reported that three actors drowned and one was seriously injured while making the torrential scene, which used huge volumes of water. As a result, the film is apparently responsible for stricter safety regulations on stunt scenes. That's what The Guardian reports. Anyway, we haven't been able to verify it, so check out the links in the show notes.

Of course, there was no safety for those who experienced the original flood, whenever it was, however widespread it was. But if John Walton is right, it'd be a mistake to dwell on the idea that God wiped out who knows how many people in a big flood. I mean, it, of course, raises the age old question of natural suffering. So check out episode 67 for our recent discussion of that. My point is Walton is saying that, really, the Bible's flood story is just taking a universal tradition from the ancient Near East and then recasting it for theological purposes. And at the heart of that theology is God's renewal of all things. The story is not so much about an end. It's about a beginning and Russell Crowe, aka the 2014 Noah, agrees with me

Speaker 9:

Is this the end of everything?

Russell Crowe:

The beginning. The beginning of everything.

John Dickson:

So I'm going to now, with my final question, sort of draw you out of the ancient world, your happy place, into our modern context and I'd love for you to sort of reflect, if you can, on the messages you reckon a modern reader should be able to pick up from the flood story. And if you can, do it in two parts. Can you tell me what you reckon a believer should pick up and what do you think our sceptical doubting friends?

John Walton:

Well, I think that a believer should pick up an understanding of the ways that God has pursued his plans and purposes. I mean, that's, to me, what the Bible is about. That's what the Bible's informing us about. And, therefore, as we read these narratives, we're supposed to understand how God has pursued these plans and purposes. And we see the flood in that context, as an aberration on the human part that has come about just when we pursued our own desires and our own ways. And so a believer should see it that way rather than, I might say, as an opportunity for an apologist to prove the Bible true. I don't think that has a lot of currency to make it work because the Bible's not trying to give us what we need to reconstruct an event. It's giving us what we need to understand the theological movement here.

John Dickson:

So despite this beautiful ark with animals all over it sitting here on your desk, I'll put a photo on the website so that people can see it, you don't think we should be running around spending archaeological dollars trying to find the ark.

John Walton:

No, I don't think that we should and I don't think we should be trying to do geology and all of that to try to prove the nature of the flood. I don't think that we should be trying to let the Bible's truth rest on our ability to reconstruct it. So.

John Dickson:

Yeah. And what about for the sceptic? What message do you reckon is found there?

John Walton:

Yeah. Hopefully, this approach makes this, it kind of takes it away as ammunition to the sceptic because the things that a sceptic would say, "Oh, that never happened" or "That couldn't possibly happen" or "There's no evidence for that", all of that is diffused because we don't have to prove those things happened. It's the theological message that's important and the sceptic then would have to engage the theological message. And that's a little harder to say that's not true. So the details really can't be used to cast doubt on the Bible, but a sceptic should be able to recognize that when human tyrants and autocrats seize order for themselves and seek to exploit it for their own benefits, the results are typically undesirable.

John Dickson:

That's fairly provable.

John Walton:

Right. I mean, welcome to our world. But in that sense, when you talk about the corruption and violence of the ancient world, yes, that's it.

John Dickson:

And then what does turning to the wisdom of God do for us in that context?

John Walton:

Well, turning to the wisdom of God involves accepting the idea that God is the one who is initiating, inaugurating these plans and purposes and carrying them out. And the fact that we often don't see them actually coming about is not because we've got an ignorant God or an incapable God or anything of that sort. It's rather because he keeps giving us enough leash with the idea that we can do better.

John Dickson:

John Walton, thank you so much. We are well and truly into the swing of season seven now, and I hope you're enjoying the ride. If you are, perhaps you'd like to become an Undeceptions Plus subscriber. For as little as \$5 Aussie per month, you can get access to a bunch of extras, including full uncut interviews with some of our guests, special extended episodes, and an invitation to our exclusive Facebook community, where you get a glimpse of how we put the show together.

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Next episode on Undeceptions, we're talking about the faith that takes the prize today for the world's most lovable religion, the nice guy on the religious block, Buddhism. See you. Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley, though perhaps not after today. Editing by Richard Hamwi, social media by Sophie Hawkshaw, administration by Lyndie Leviston. Siobhan McGuinness is our librarian. Shout out to our series sponsor, Zondervan, for making this Undeception possible. Undeceptions is the flagship podcast of [undeceptions.com](https://undeceptions.com), letting the truth out. An Undeceptions podcast.