

Communications

THE FLOOD STORY

TO THE EDITOR,

In his “Note of the Flood Story in the Language of Man” (*Tradition*, 42:3, Fall 2009), Joel B. Wolowelsky points out the similarity between the events described in the Biblical Flood story and some of the events described in the Gilgamesh Epic. He writes: “The point by point concordance between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Biblical Flood story is either deliberate or purely coincidental, and the degree of agreement makes the latter untenable.” He further suggests that this literary relationship should be highlighted in our educational curriculum.

This presents a false dichotomy. The correspondence between the stories need not be either deliberate or coincidental; rather, it reflects the fact that both stories refer to the same actual event whose memory was preserved by many peoples. To put this differently: The correspondence between events described in two stories proves a literary relationship only if both stories are fictional. Thus, if we find two different books about a character named David Copperfield and the main events of his life are the same in both books we could, indeed, infer that one book had borrowed from the other. But if we find two books about Charles Dickens, and the main events of his life are the same in both books, we need not infer any literary relationship. The events are the same because they really happened.

Why should we be surprised that both the Biblical story of the Flood and the Gilgamesh Epic mention an ark, animals, birds sent out to test the waters etc., if we believe that there really were such things? If they existed, they were certainly memorable enough to have been rendered into an epic. Some people, of course, don’t believe that such things could ever have existed, and to them the argument that there must be a relationship between two such similar fictions will seem very compelling. But that is hardly a view which we want to introduce into our children’s curriculum.

I am reminded of what G. K. Chesterton wrote in a similar context: “Learned men literally say that this pre-historic calamity cannot be true because every race of mankind remembers it. I cannot keep pace with these paradoxes.”

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JOEL B. WOLOWELSKY RESPONDS:

R. Nissonovich seems to have confused a good number of the points I made and, indeed, missed the main point. Let me try to sort things out.

His quote from Chesterton seems to suggest that he thought I was saying that there was no pre-historic flood calamity. I thought I was very clear on this point when I wrote:

Needless to say, this approach no more suggests that there was no catastrophic flood than does the position that God has no physical limb claim that “He took us out with a mighty arm” is false and that we were never taken out of Egyptian slavery. It has no relevance to the secular debate on the historicity of the Bible. We are not talking about whether the Flood happened but the literary devices the Torah used to describe it.

Indeed, I was writing *against* Prof. Spero’s suggestion that the Biblical Flood story was an allegory.

R. Nissonovich then seems to suggest that the events in the Gilgamesh Epic really happened as preserved by the memory of the people who experienced it and who then related it to their descendents. Since I doubt he is committing himself to the pagan world view expressed in many of the details of the Epic – details that make up a fundamental component of the story – he must be saying that the Epic describes an actual event but got some of the details wrong, and that the Torah, in presenting an authoritative description of the Flood, makes the necessary corrections to the story as heard by the Jewish community from its neighbors at the time of *matan Torah*. So far, so good.

Now suppose there is a well-known story about 20th-century John Smith that mistakenly says that he died at the age of 27 and that it is corrected to say that he died “after 120 years.” If Smith were a well-known ideal folk-hero and the original story was being told to popularize the view that the good die young, we might well want to tell the story differently as part of a campaign against that worldview. If Smith were an actual historical personality, we might have similar or other reasons for wanting to make the correction and noting that he had not died at an early age. But the correction in and of itself would say nothing about whether we thought Smith was a historical or fictional character.

But suppose Smith was a historical person and all historical and medical records showed that no one lived to the age of 120. We would not be troubled about this ostensible conflict with science because we know that “120 years” is a proverbially phrase that is not meant to be taken literally

even though the correction was true. We would understand that the revision was made *ki-leshon benai adam*. There is a difference between saying that something is true and that it is literally true. I am sure that R. Nissonovich agrees that it is true that God took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. I surely hope he does not believe that it is true that God has a hand and arm.

Now we come to the main point of what I wrote – a point missed by R. Nissonovich. We are not surprised that both the Biblical Flood story and the Gilgamesh Epic mention an ark, animals, birds sent out to test the waters, and so on – although we certainly note the crucial fundamental differences in the respective interpretations of the events. What we are struck by is the fact that a literal reading of parts of the Biblical story seriously contradicts our scientific knowledge. (We need not list all the apparent conflicts here, but the dates involved in the genealogical tables are important examples.) Ibn Kaspi’s generalized notion of *ki-leshon benai adam* quickly and simply removes this conflict. In battling the pagan worldview expressed and disseminated by the way the Flood story was told among people of the Near East at the time when the Torah was given, the Torah uses the popular *leshon benai adam* of the period in telling the story from a Torah perspective and thereby promulgates its *Weltanschauung*. Since the story is told *ki-leshon benai adam*, it need not necessarily be taken literally in all of its details even though it is true. Explaining how perceived conflicts between science and Torah can be easily resolved should certainly be an important component of our educational policies.

This is really all very simple and not sensational in the least. But, as G. K. Chesterson also said, “The simplification of anything is always sensational” – at least to some people.

TORAH AND SCIENCE

TO THE EDITOR,

While I was most delighted to see my esteemed colleague, Dr. Nathan Aviezer’s article, “When Torah and Science Collide” (*Tradition* 42:3, Fall 2009), I was a bit disappointed that, during his scholarly enumeration of seven approaches to the Genesis-1-science problem, he omitted a recent major approach to this problem. Dr. Aviezer’s preferred approach to Genesis 1 rests on four premises which I disagree with in my paper, “Genesis 1 Speaks about the Creation of Prophecy Not the Creation of

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the World” (*B’or Ha’Torah* Vol 13E, pp 71-87: 2002). I also disagree with Dr. Aviezer’s treatment of approach #1 and #2 in his own paper. I now enumerate his four assumptions and show where I differ.

Assumption A – External vs. Internal Contradiction: Both Dr. Aviezer and myself reject a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 due to contradictions. However we differ on the *type* of contradiction needed to justify a textual reinterpretation. I use the approach that Dr. Aviezer calls “*Read the Rishonim.*” I contend that contradictions to the literal meaning of a biblical text must be found in the text *itself*. In my article I cite several *internal* biblical texts indicating that Adam was not the first person: Kayin’s city was inhabited by other people; the snake was presumably a person with a snake like personality; Gen. 1:2, when interpreted using certain grammatical rules reads “the world *had been* [before the creation] formless and void.”

By contrast, Dr. Aviezer, explicitly justifies his reinterpretation of Genesis 1 based on *external* contradictions: “a wealth of scientific knowledge contradicts the literal interpretation of Genesis 1.” My criticism of Dr. Aviezer’s methodology is further elaborated at a deeper level in my discussion of assumption B, immediately below. I contend that a fundamental biblical principle is the accessibility of the Bible to all people at all times. We shouldn’t have to wait for science to develop to know the real meaning of Genesis 1.

Assumption B – Absoluteness of Torah: Unlike Dr. Aviezer, I do believe it is dangerous to periodically reinterpret the Torah. Such an attitude implies that our interpretation today may be changed tomorrow. If that is so, then the Torah is not absolute. This, in turn, contradicts a fundamental principle of faith – that the Torah and its interpretation are, “very, very close to us” (Deut. 30:14). (Of course new technologies may require new *applications* of Torah, but this is not a *change in interpretation*, but rather a new *application*.) I believe it important to find both the contradictions and solutions to these contradictions in the biblical text and the commentaries of *Rishonim*.

Assumption C – Contradiction as a basis for metaphoric interpretation: Dr. Aviezer, based on the Guide, believes that the existence of a contradiction to the literal text *is sufficient* to justify reinterpretation. I, following R. Hirsch’s views on symbolism, as stated in his “Groundlines to Jewish Symbolism,” require three prerequisites to symbolic interpretation: 1) Contradictions to the literal text (we have documented internal contradictions above). 2) An explicitly stated *central motif* to the chapter. I argue that the creation of Adam and the prophecies to him are the climax of Genesis 1. 3) The rest of the chapter refers to objects and procedures which have clear symbolic association with the chapter’s central

theme via (a) linguistic associations, (b) other symbolic associations elsewhere in the Bible, or (c) known basic facts about the objects and procedures mentioned (function and form). In this case, each of the keywords of Genesis 1 – heaven, light, animals, spirit of God – throughout the Bible, and in the medieval dictionaries, frequently refer to prophecy. (In my article, several other biblical chapters, including *Ecclesiastes* 12 and *Isaiah* 11, are similarly analyzed.)

I therefore argue that Genesis 1, which tells us about what happened 6000 years ago, is not describing the creation of the physical world or even of man. Rather, the first prophecy occurred 6000 years ago. Adam was the first prophet. Genesis 1 is presenting to us 7 stages in achieving spirituality, the climax of which is prophecy. Hence, for example, the 2nd day, with its separation of waters above and below, symbolically resembles the fires above and below in Ezekiel's vision and corresponds to the important point of separation of the physical and spiritual. This principle of separation of physical and spiritual has an obvious spiritual relevance to the average layperson and a deeper meaning to prophets such as Adam and Ezekiel. Adam's attainment of prophecy can be seen in the prophetic commands from God to Adam prohibiting him from eating certain fruit (Gen. 2:16), as well as in the prophetic admonitions from God to Adam reprimanding him for violating God's prophetic orders (Gen. 3:8-11). Similarly, the 4th day - on which God created "lights in the firmament ... to be for symbols (*Otot*) and holidays (*Mo'adim*)" (Gen. 1:14) - corresponds to the fundamental use of commemorative holidays, which, according to the Bible, are vehicles for achieving spirituality (cf. "*asher tikre'u otam mikra'ei kodesh*" (Lev. 23:2)).

Assumption D – Defensive vs. assertive: The most serious point of difference between Dr. Aviezer and myself is regarding the attitude of resolving a contradiction. Dr. Aviezer seeks to harmonize the Torah *to* science. In other words, if science contradicts Torah, then reinterpret the Torah! But then the Torah does not say anything. It merely echoes what science allows it to. By contrast, the Torah, according to my approach, *is* saying something: It is telling us how to be spiritual. Notice also that I have not avoided Torah-Science conflicts (approach #2 in Dr. Aviezer's article), but rather I have shifted the controversy from a Torah-Physics controversy to a Torah-Psychology controversy.

It is perhaps worthwhile to close by citing my own article (p. 81): 'Currently the tone of religion is one of assertive defense. Religion only sees the possibility of consistency between Genesis 1 and science, which claims that the world is twenty billion years old. By contrast I am suggesting

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a new, vigorous, non-defensive tone: “Science shows that the physical universe is twenty billion years old. By contrast, religion has shown us the existence of prophecy that lies outside of time, space, and the universe. The Torah is helping us achieve a messianic world where prophetic status will be commonplace.”

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TO THE EDITOR,

Professor Aviezer maintains that the effect of Time Dilation is minimal. The basis for this conclusion is that the observed effect of Time Dilation near the atmosphere of the sun is only two parts per million. Theoretically, the gravitational effect during the Big Bang was nearly infinitely greater than the gravitational effect of the sun. Why can't this be a basis to explain that, in relative time, only six days had passed – as some physicists have suggested?

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PROFESSOR AVIEZER REPLIES:

The very different approaches expressed in my article and in the letter of Dr. Russell Hendel illustrate the principle of Hazal that the Torah is a multifaceted book (*shiv'im panim la-Torah*) that can be understood on many different levels.

Dr. Hendel writes: “I have shifted the controversy from a Torah-Physics controversy to a Torah-Psychology controversy.” This is perfectly legitimate. However, there are no grounds for claiming that my approach is illegitimate.

Dr. Hendel writes that “each of the keywords of Genesis I – heaven, light, animals, spirit of G-d – refers to prophecy...Genesis I is not describing the creation of the physical world...but presents the seven stages in achieving spirituality, the climax of which is prophecy.” This interpretation of Dr. Hendel is not my cup of tea. I think that the first chapter of Bereshit *is discussing* the creation and development of the physical world. However, I don't assert that Dr. Hendel is mistaken, simply because he has a different interpretation from mine.

But I do have one criticism. Dr. Hendel writes: “Unlike Dr. Aviezer, I believe that it is dangerous to periodically reinterpret the Torah...This contradicts a fundamental principle of faith – that the Torah and its interpretation are ‘very, very close to us’ (Deut. 30:14).”

Unfortunately, Dr. Hendel has misconstrued the verse in Devarim, as can be seen by quoting the verse in context: “The *mitsva* that I command you today is not hidden from you nor is it far away. It is not in Heaven... nor beyond the sea...but it [*mitsva*] is very, very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to fulfill it” (Dev. 30:11-14). These verses are discussing G-d’s *commandments*, which, of course, are not subject to re-interpretation on the basis of science. But my article dealt with the *narrative portions* of the Torah, which *are* subject to multiple interpretations, as different *Rishonim* have shown us.

Dr. Michael Weiss mentions the time dilation caused by the large gravitational forces associated with the big bang, and asks whether this time dilation could explain the discrepancy between the “Six Days of Creation” of Bereshit and the multibillion-year-old universe of the scientist. As Dr. Weiss correctly points out, the gravitational force in the universe *immediately* after the big bang was strong. However, this era lasted for only a fraction of a second. At all later times, gravitational forces in the universe have been extremely weak. For example, comparing the gravitational force and the electrical force between two electrons (both forces have the same inverse square dependence on distance) shows that the former is smaller than the latter by a factor of one million, billion, billion, billion, billion! The extreme weakness of the gravitational force permits cosmologists to analyze the history of the universe (excluding the first second) without recourse to quantum theory. This is of utmost importance because there currently is no accepted quantum theory of gravity.

The bottom line is that scientists might be in error regarding the length of the first second, but for the subsequent 13.7 billion years of the existence of the universe, the time scale is universal and is almost unaffected by relativistic time dilation.