

The Flood Traditions and Their Relation to the Bible

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So numerous among the nations and tribes of the world are the traditions of a deluge that a treatment of such a theme in so small a compass as this is likely to suffer from two rather serious faults. It may be uninteresting because it approaches too closely to being merely a catalogue of sources. And it may become of little permanent value by concentrating for the sake of interest on too few of these records to make it in any sense a treatment of flood traditions in general. What I propose to do, therefore, is to discuss some of the more surprising common factors which are embedded within by far the greater number of these stories, and having pointed these out to show that their diversity is of a nature which makes the Biblical record of peculiar importance. At the end of the paper I propose to list, so that the article may be used subsequently as a key to a wider study if desired, a catalogue of the nations which have such stories, and the sources where I personally have found references made by authorities, detailed or otherwise, to these ancient records. If this paper awakens your interest in the general question and leads you to make further investigations, it will provide a key for such study. At the same time any student may find it valuable to have such a source catalogue behind him, if he has occasion to disagree with teaching which maintains that the flood was of no great significance and the Hebrew record a mere borrowing from pagan sources that had recorded only an unusual abnormal river flood.

At this point certain considerations might be remarked upon in regard to the possibility of borrowing on the part of the Bible and on the part of pagan traditions. The only case where borrowing from the Bible might be suggested is

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in the case of the Syrian story referred to by Lucian, the source of which I have added at the end of the paper. Apart from this one tradition three important considerations apply to them all. First, other Biblical events such as the passage of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the standing still of the sun and the story of Jonah are sufficiently remarkable and supernatural to be taken over by the various peoples into their mythology and made their own. No trace of these however is found except in two cases, and both of these in the Latin traditions. It is only what would be expected, if the flood traditions are relics of an experimental fact in which the world of men was involved. Secondly, if the flood story is the result of very early missionary activity the other stories would also be found, and the flood story itself would have been preserved with greater accuracy in the places where the story is preserved in ordinance and rite as well as tradition. And thirdly, the assumption of the truth of the deluge account of Genesis offers a satisfactory explanation of the fact that the more ancient a tradition is, and the more close geographically to that central place in Asia where the Bible says the ark landed, the more reasonable and sane is the legend, the more generally like the Biblical account and vice versa. It is well known that a story loses its accuracy each time it is told; that accounts for the general situation as it exists.

That the Bible has borrowed its account from the traditions of Babylonia and Assyria is the stand usually taken by critics in general. But a comparison of the flood story of these people with the record of Genesis reveals a remarkable number of differences which could not be accounted for thus. Hence one scholar says, "An examination of the Babylonian deluge tablets enables us to detect a number of words and phrases which have been derived directly from some older document used by the compiler of that work." That document, in spite of all that has been urged by Schrader and Delitzsch, appears to have been

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considerably older than the Babylonian deluge tablets. For instance, the latter speak of a "ship," a "steering-man" and the ship as "sailing." The description in all the editions of the Babylonian story is the same, but all these things are omitted in the Genesis record. "It would have been easy in the course of time to develop a ship out of a floating barge, and to introduce gradually the idea of a steersman. But the reverse process is inconceivable" (Rev. C. H. Wright, M.A., D.D., Ph.D.; Knight of the North Star, Sweden; formerly Donnelian Lecturer, T.C.D.; Bampton Lecturer; Grinfield Lecturer on the LXX.; Public Examiner on Semitic Languages in Oxford). It might be pointed out that it is an acknowledged law that tradition grows in detail as it ages, especially detail characteristic of a locality. As far as I know, once a tradition is found which can be traced back for any considerable length of time, it has been found without exception to have grown in detail, not diminished. This is one of the fundamental laws which the critics themselves recognize. Moreover, no other flood tradition has ever been claimed as the basis of the Biblical narrative except the Babylonian and Assyrian (which are essentially one). Thus it is almost certain that the record in Genesis is the authentic history.

The common factors of these traditions may be considered under three general heads: first, the cause and effect of the deluge; second, the fact that a favoured few escaped; third, the method of their escape. Almost without exception the moral collapse of mankind is the cause assigned. This is most significant. To teach this very lesson appears to have been the chief reason for the incorporation of the story within the Bible. For example, witness the use made of it in the New Testament. Similarly the Babylonian account says, after relating the escape of Ziugiddu who was given advance notice of the coming catastrophe, "Then Ziugiddu, the King of the seed that was cursed, he [the god] made." In his famous work *The Growth of Religion* Prof. Schmidt of Vienna says, "The most primitive

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tribes among the Australians have a tradition of a flood that God sent to punish mankind" (p. 247). The Persian story related by Cumont

taught, "The world, having been corrupted by Ahriman, the prince of darkness, it was necessary to cover it with a flood to sweep away its impurity." The story adds that the waters prevailed above the earth about five cubits, so that all the creation died save one man alone (because he had been secretly advised by the gods he could escape). The Persian founders of Mithraism placed the beginning of history in this event. According to Nelson, two other Persian traditions tell the same story with somewhat peculiar details.

The Greek tradition of the escape of Deucalian is well known, Hesiod and Ovid both referring to it. The striking thing again lies in the fact that sin brought on the judgment. In a paraphrase of the latter we read, "Mankind's a monster, and the ungodly times confederate with guilt are sworn to crimes. All are alike involved in ill, and all must by the same relentless fury fall." Lucian, who also refers to this tradition, tells that Deucalian made provision for certain animals, and that he emphatically declares the visitation was caused by the enormous sin of man. It is interesting to note that he says the earth as well as the heavens poured out water. Other traditions specifically say the same thing. For example, the Pimas, another tribe in Northern Mexico less well known than the Aztecs, etc., relate that a certain prophet was warned by an eagle (a messenger from heaven) about a deluge coming, but the man laughed at it. A second warning came from the same bird that also went unheeded. The eagle came a third time, saying that the whole Gila valley would be laid waste. Still he gave no heed. Then there came suddenly a peal of thunder and an awful crash, besides a green mound of water raised itself over the plain. The realism of this tradition is paralleled in many of them. Cf. the Babylonian tradition which likewise refers to the changes in weather. In Barton's translation of line 92 we read, "I observed the

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appearance of the day, the day was terrible to look upon... There arose from the horizon a black cloud. The god Adad thundered in the midst...All light was turned to darkness. The wind blew, and the deluge the flood overpowered [whatever this means], while the gods cried like frightened children and crouched in terror like dogs..." The hero of the story (Utnapishtim) says "I looked upon the sea, their heaving was now still. All mankind was dead, and like logs floated about." In line 137 he records later how the horror of the scene overcame him and he burst into tears.

In the Pacific islands there are many striking traditions, and especially this one from the Leeward Islands, "Shortly after the first peopling of the world by Taata [their Adam], Ruahatu, the ocean god, was reposing among the coral beds in the depth of the sea in a sacred spot. A fisherman lowered his hook among the branching corals at the bottom and his hook became entangled in the hair of the sleeping god. In an instant the god, aroused, appeared at the surface and after upbraiding him for his impiety declared *the land was criminal*, and convicted of great guilt and should be destroyed." In reference to the subsequent flood which swept all before it save the fisherman, the tradition says "The waters of the ocean began to rise." This statement is made with no reference to rain from heaven. The idea of impiety and sin is most emphatically recalled in many traditions, if not in the vast majority-though it used to be claimed otherwise. The Hawaiians say that long after the time of Kumuhonna, the first man, the earth became wicked and careless of the worship of the gods. "One man alone was righteous and his name was Nu-u. He made a great canoe with a house on it and then stored it with food, taking plants and animals into it. Then the waters came up [not, came down] over the earth and destroyed all of mankind except Nu-u and his family. When he came out upon the land after the waters had subsided, he looked up and saw the moon and thought that it was Kane, the

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great god; and so worshipped it. This displeased Kane, and he came down *on a rainbow* and reproved Nu-u, but he did not punish him, for Nu-u did this by mistake. When he returned to the sky he left the rainbow behind him in token of his forgiveness." This is striking in many respects. For the very name of the righteous man is preserved, and the fact that it was sin which brought the deluge and that this in turn came up over the earth, and finally that a rainbow was left as a promise in the sky.

Referring for a moment to the old world again, the Egyptians do not seem to have very definite traditions and that for a significant reason. The flooding of the Nile, the only likely source of a flood in this locality, is and always has been considered a work of kindness on the part of the righteous gods. This is most striking, for it adds double testimony to the Biblical account thereby. If all the nations of antiquity have a flood story and link it with an act of judgment on the part of the gods except one people, and if the story in each case is a fragment of historical fact, there must be some particular reason for this, or the case for the universality of the flood is weakened considerably, especially when the missing tradition is located among a people who made the most careful records from the earliest antiquity. The explanation in the case of the Egyptians is that a flood could not be conceived of as a punishment. And in confirmation of this observe that the god of the river Nile was called No (with a later dual form, No-Ammon, so as to link two gods together). There surely can be little doubt that this recurrence of the name in the Leeward Islands and in Egypt is something remarkable, far too remarkable to be considered a mere coincidence or accident. Besides, the Egyptians are not entirely without the basic elements of a universal judgment in their tradition. It is only in the method of the punishment that they offer an exception. So when this exception is readily explained, it is striking evidence in favour of the historical reality of the deluge. Their vague traditions do state that once upon a

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time Ra assembled the gods and said, "Behold, the men who have been begotten by myself, they utter words against me. Tell me what you would do in such a case. Behold, I have waited and have not slain them before listening to their words." The reply was, "Let thy face permit it, and let those men who devise wicked things be smitten and let none among them exist." A goddess named Hathor went forth among them and "slew the men upon the earth, and behold, Sechet for many nights trod with his feet in their blood even to the city of Heracleopolis." The anger of Ra is appeased by an offering comprised of seven thousand pitchers of liquor made from fruit mixed with human blood. Ra came to see the vases and said, "It is well, I shall protect men because of this. I lift my hand in regard to this and declare that I shall no more slay mankind." In the middle of the night he commanded the vases to be overthrown. The result was a flood which, in accordance with Egyptian experience, was regarded as a sign of returning favour." (See "The Testimony of Tradition to the Flood," Bible League Quarterly, 1937, issue 152.) The Rev. J. H. Titcomb, M.A., of the Victoria Institute says in his paper on *Ethnic Testimonies to the Pentateuch*, "Speaking of Noah, it is worthy of remark also that some of the hieroglyphic inscriptions represent 'the god of water' under the name of Noh or No (this was the deity

who presided over the annual overflow of the Nile), a title which plainly related to some traditional recollection of Noah presiding triumphantly over the flood" (*Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, VI, 241).

Referring once more to the fact that sin underlay the judgment, we may note the Syrian account of Lucian in which he says 'The aborigines were full of pride and insolence, unfaithful to their promises, inhospitable to strangers, deaf to supplicants. Hence they were overtaken by a great disaster. The earth suddenly opened up its sluices, heavy showers of rain fell, the rivers swelled and the waters everywhere prevailed.' Jupiter, according to the *Metamorphoses*

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of Ovid, determined once to destroy the impious race of men sprung from the blood of Titans and proceeded to do so by a great flood. Here notice the word, Titans. There are numerous references to these giants, and it is surprising to find that most of the flood stories connect the sin of the antediluvians with these giants. For example, the Lithuanians have a tradition that the god whom they called Pramzinas, seeing the earth was filled with disorder, sent two giants, Wandu and Weyas, to ravage it and the punishment was carried out by an overwhelming flood. This only indirectly connects the giants with the event, but is interesting for the idea is repeated so frequently. In the Persian story already referred to, the waters covered the earth and all the evil beings were drowned. A violent wind then came and finally dried up the ground, however there still remained some germs of the evil beings which could yet reappear. And though the judge, Testrya, again came down in the form of a white horse in order to wipe these out of existence, he was challenged by a black horse, none other than the demon Aposha, who successfully fought him off. This might all be compared with the statement in Gen 6 that there were giants in the time of the apostasy, who were probably (as I believe) connected with demons or fallen angels, and after that time-even after the deluge-they still remained, now mentioned with the name Anakim. In Scandinavia we read in the *Voluspa* that "Bor's son slew the giant Ymi, and when he fell so much blood ran out of his wounds that the whole generation of the Rime-orges was drowned in it, save one who escaped with his household." The Voguls in the Ural Mountains of Russia have this legend, "After seven years of drought the great woman said to the great man, 'It will rain presently. How must we save ourselves?' And the other giants assembled together in a town to take counsel, 'What must we do?'" And the tradition tells of a universal flood from which the man and the woman escaped in a hewn-out log.

The sin element in these stories takes some strange

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forms. A Fiji Island legend, as reported by Williams, is to the effect that the cause of the flood was the killing of a favourite bird of the god Mdengei by his two evil grandsons. These, instead of apologizing for their offense, added insolent language to the outrage and fortifying themselves in the high town in which they lived, defied the god to do his worst. The god sent a flood which overthrew them, while a remnant of the race was saved in a vessel which was at last grounded by the subsiding waters on Mbenga. Hence the Mbenga draw their claim to stand first in Fiji rank. This brings us to the question of locality. It is not surprising that most of the people who maintain such traditions also hold that the ark rested in their own locality. The Andaman Islands have a story in which the survivors found themselves near Wotaemi, when the waters had subsided. According to the *National Geographic Magazine*, the Menangkalan natives of Sumatra have a tradition that Noah landed on their Mount Marapi. The Pimas, of whom mention has already been made, say that Szenkha, the son of the Creator, saved himself by floating on a ball of resin (cf. the bitumen of the Biblical narrative) and that when the waters fell a little he landed near the mouth of the Salt River. The Phrygian account of the deluge says that the ark landed at the city of Apamaea, and they still point to the actual spot which tradition upholds. In the Greek legend of Deucalian, the hero and his wife finally landed on Mount Parnassus.

Some of these stories are so extraordinary that they are almost humorous, yet for all that they quite obviously point to a great catastrophe which left its indelible mark upon the ancient world. The Crees of Manitoba tell of a universal deluge caused by an attempt of the fish to drown Woesachootacht, a kind of demigod with whom they had quarreled. Having constructed a raft, he embarked with his family and all kinds of birds and beasts. After the flood had continued for some time he ordered several water fowl to dive to the bottom. They were all drowned (since the

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waters were so deep). But a muskrat, having been dispatched on the same errand, was more successful and returned with a mouthful of mud.

There are not lacking traditions which recall the number of people who escaped from the deluge. Among these are the Indian and the Chinese traditions. An East Indian legend says, "Then Vishnu addressed his worshipper and said, 'In the course of seven days all creatures which have wronged me shall be exterminated by a flood. But thou shalt be saved in a great ship marvelously built. Take therefore all kinds of useful vegetables and then do thou embark with the seven Rishies, thy wife and their wives.'" It is true that in this story the total number, including the wives, would have been sixteen. Nevertheless in the actual record the emphasis is laid upon the number of men, which totalled eight. In the Chinese story which is to be found in *Hihking*, one of the ancient Chinese classics, Fuhi, the reputed founder of Chinese civilization, escaped the waters of a deluge and reappeared as the first man at the reproduction of a renovated world, accompanied by his wife, his three sons and three daughters, making a total of eight. On a Buddhist temple in China the traveller, Gutzlaff, reports that he saw "in a beautiful stucco the scene where Kwanyin, the goddess of mercy, looks down from heaven upon the lonely Noah in his ark amidst the raging waters of the deluge, with the dolphins swimming around him and the dove with an olive branch in its beak flying toward the vessel." I have previously referred to the Fiji tradition, but did not mention that according to Wilke's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*, II, 50, the Fiji Islanders preserve the tradition that there were eight persons saved. And in Dr. Morrison's references to the Chinese story he quotes that they preserved a story of how the waters inclosed within its bosom burst forth with violence and overflowed it. And in another place he gives the following quotation, "In the Shooking, after a fanciful statement of the creation, there follows a period of Chinese civilization when Fuh-se's successors

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introduced marriage, government, working in metals, the use of musical instruments and characters for the division of time. The profligacy of Te-chih and his misrule is noticed, and then follows Yaon's deluge."

A general survey of these traditions would not be complete without some reference to the Druids, whose traditions are so interesting and in many cases so close in form and content to the histories of the Old Testament. Davies in his *Mythology of the British Druids* gives their legend as follows, "The profligacy of mankind provoked the Great Supreme to send a pestilential wind upon the earth. At this time the patriarch, distinguished for his integrity, was shut up together with his select company in the enclosure with a strong door. Presently a tempest of fire arose. It split the earth asunder to the great deep. The Lake Llion burst its bounds, the waves of the sea lifted themselves on high, the rain poured down from heaven and the water covered the whole earth. This flood, which swept away from the earth the expiring remains of the patriarch's contemporaries, raised his vessel from the ground, bore it safe on the summit of the waves and proved to him and his associates as the water of life and renovation" (p. 226ff).

When one has read these stories and the many, many others which I have simply referred to at the end of this paper, one is irresistibly forced to the conclusion that they really represent one historical fact. When we find an article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica entitled "The Deluge," written by a higher critic and quoting Sir James Frazer to the effect that "Many of the stories arise from the inundations caused by the far-reaching tidal waves that accompany earthquakes, and some from inundations caused by rain," we must surely conclude that the author has either not taken the trouble to read these traditions or blinded himself to the fact that comparison shows an extraordinary number of similarities, which are not such as would naturally occur in the mere record of an inundation. Roughly speaking, these similarities are to be observed in regard to the

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following factors: the flood was a specific judgment for a specific sin, that of impiety and lawlessness; one family or one individual was forewarned by being told in what form the judgment would come; this forewarning was almost in every case by supernatural agency; the deluge was sudden and universal, as far as men were concerned; the favoured survivors landed on a high spot, and thence filled the earth; in a number of the traditions some form of experiment was made by the survivors during the deluge in order to ascertain how deep the water was, or to learn whether the deluge was on the wane; as we have seen, some of the stories mention the rainbow as a token which bore a promise, and others mention the dove which was sent out; four of the stories mention the number of souls being saved as totalling eight, and three of them give the name of the survivor as one practically identical with the name Noah. Surprising though it is, the Toltecs had a story recorded by the native historian of Mexico, Ixtlilxochitl, in which it is specifically mentioned that "The highest mountains were covered up and submerged in water fifteen cubits deep [caxtolmotli]." This same record goes on to state how "After men had multiplied they erected a very high zacuali, which is today a tower of great height, in order to take refuge in it should the second world be destroyed. Presently their languages were confused, and not being able to understand each other they went to different parts of the earth." In the National Geographic Magazine for February, 1922, is an illustration of a Maya hieroglyphic manuscript on which is painted the scene of the deluge. Dr. Garnier in *The Worship of the Dead* remarks upon the fact that the most different and often isolated and primitive peoples all over the world have observed from the earliest times a "festival of the dead," held on the seventeenth day of the second month of their respective calendars, this being the exact day when according to the Biblical account the flood began. Moreover, on their respective calendars he says that this date is celebrated in their second month no matter what number of

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months they may happen to include in each year. Dr. F. von Schwartz in *Sintfluth und Volker Wanderungen* enumerates sixty-three flood stories in his possession at the time (pp. 8-18), while Mr. R. Andrée in *Die Flutsagen Ethnographisch Betrachtet* discusses eighty-eight different flood stories and considers that certainly sixty-two, if not more, are absolutely independent of one another. The Imperial Bible Dictionary says that even among the most scattered and savage tribes on the Orinoco, Humboldt found the tradition of a deluge common to them all, including the Tamanacs, Maypures, the Indians of the Rio Erevato, each of them giving their own distinctive colour to the story. The traditions, he says, "are like the relics of a vast shipwreck," and as such "are highly interesting in the philosophical study of our own species. In the great continents, as in the smallest islands of the Pacific, it is always on the loftiest and nearest mountain that the remains of the human race have been saved, and this event appears the more recent in proportion as the nations are uncultivated and as the knowledge they have of their own existence has no very remote date."

And this brings us to the final point of comparison. The local character of each of these traditions is a common feature of them, but with one exception and that the Biblical narrative. Great as must have been the temptation of any historian to glorify his own country as the centre of the new world, the writer of the Biblical narrative refrained from setting the flood in his own locality. Moses states specifically that Noah and his immediate family landed in Armenia on Mount Ararat. This is most significant. The only logical explanation of the fact is that Moses was writing history and a true history at that. The extraordinary features which characterize the Indian and Nordic traditions and the strange polytheism which is a most emphatic element in the Babylonian traditions (cf. how "The gods crowded around the subsequent sacrifice like flies") and also the clear local colouring of the remainder of the

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accounts, with a host of other absurd impossibilities incorporated as facts, set the Biblical narrative in a class by itself infinitely removed from all the other stories. And the more one studies the Biblical record in comparison and contrast with these pagan traditions, the more one realizes that this story provides, with its simple and scientifically possible detail, the key to all the weirdness of the other traditions. The universality of these traditions however does not mean that the flood was over all the earth, for this would mean that each locality where tradition is now preserved must have provided some survivors. This is in direct contradiction to the Biblical narrative, as it is to the traditions themselves. At the same time they are a clear evidence that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness, and that the world carries unquestionably in its own oral and written tradition a recognition of the time when this was most

dreadfully demonstrated.

But the record is not yet altogether complete, for there are still to be noticed the references in tradition to the subsequent history of the ark itself. Josephus in his "Antiquities," I, iii, states that its remains could be seen in his days, i.e. A.D. 90. He gives the place and says that the Armenians call it "the place of the descent." The Armenian historian, Moses Chorenensis, and Ptolemy also mention the spot under the same name. Furthermore, Josephus is not afraid to say that all barbarian historians mention the ark, and that some state how its remains could be seen at the time they wrote. He gives three or four of these by name, Berosus the Chaldean, c. B.C. 258, Nicolaus of Damascus, c. B.C. 30, Hieronymus the Egyptian, c. B.C. 320 and Mnaseas, and quotes the following passages from the first two, "It is said that there is still some part of this ship in Armenia at the mountain of the Corydaeans, and that some people carry off pieces of the bitumen which they take away and use chiefly as amulets for averting troubles" (Berosus). "There is a great mountain in Armenia, overlooking Menyas,

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called Baris...and that one who was carried in an ark, after the flood, came on shore upon the top of it, and the remains of the timber were a great while preserved" (Nicolaus). As mentioned previously in another part of *Antiquities*, huge timbers completely coated with bitumen would be almost indestructible, especially on the level at which the ark is said to have come to rest. A few months ago we were told that the palm-fibre ropes with which Solomon secured his ships had been found buried in the sands of Akaba. No one had any difficulty in accepting the evidence of the archaeologists as to this discovery, though very few will ever have the opportunity of confirming the fact by visiting the site. These ropes have remained for three thousand years. Yet no weight is given to the evidence of the ancient historians in connection with the persistence of the ark for only about two thousand years. Perfectly true are the words of Napoleon when he said, "It is amazing what a man will believe as long as it is not in the Bible."

May I conclude with a quotation written in the characteristic style of a great man, John Urquhart, "If this awful tragedy ever happened; if the entire human race perished save one family, and perished by the hand of God in punishment of sin; then that judgment must have cast long shadows. Through generation after generation the story must have lived on. It must have been the most awful and most solemn recollection of our race. Many things may have been forgotten, but that could not be forgotten. If, then, we search the traditions of one nation after another, and find no trace anywhere of such a fearful calamity; if, among the things handed down from sire to son, this has no place; if poets have not numbered it among their themes, and the learned have not retained it among the treasures culled from the wisdom and the knowledge of the past; then we might conclude that no such event had ever happened. But, if we find that the reverse of all we have supposed is the truth; if this recollection has a large place among the treasures of learning and the themes of poetry; if it has moulded

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the traditions of every part of the far-sundered family of man; then the conclusion is evident. There must have been some awful disaster that left its impress upon the minds of men before they scattered abroad upon the earth; and the traditions would, in that case, be a testimony to man's unity as well as to the fact of the deluge." And it is so. And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the time of the coming of the Son of man. And as in the first case men will not believe judgment came, so today men will not believe that judgment is imminent, but the establishment of the first guarantees the second; wherefore let us be sober, looking for the coming of the Lord, warning all men as God gives opportunity and redeeming the time, for the days are evil.

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Convictions of Some Great Men

"I have regularly and attentively read the Holy Scriptures, and am of the opinion that this volume, independently of its divine origin, contains more true sublimity, more exquisite beauty, more pure morality, more important history, and finer strains, both of poetry and eloquence, than could be collected from all other books."-Sir Williams Jones, the great Oriental scholar.

"I have read the Bible morning, and night, and have ever since been happier and better man for such reading."-Edmund Burke.

Quoted from *The Peerless Book*.

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