Paul Hoskisson

The authors of the Old Testament told very few “stories” for a story’s sake. Scriptural accounts were meant to illustrate a point usually having to do with Israel’s relationship to God. Authors carefully chose how they presented their messages, often fashioning the way they presented history in order to emphasize continuing themes. Those looking at the Bible as a strictly scientific, literally precise, and historically exact record often become frustrated when they come to stories that don’t fit in well with what is known from secular studies.

One of the accounts that falls into this category is that of Noah and the Flood. Many theories abound as to interpretation, but few hold water when evaluated scientifically, literally, or historically. Instead of concentrating on the discrepancies between secular theories and traditional interpretations, warns retired BYU Professor Paul Hoskisson, readers would get further by concentrating on looking for what is being taught. The literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning are not “either/or” propositions and both are important. However, if one gets hung up on the literal meaning, one can rarely get to the ultimate meaning.

Joseph Smith never commented on interpretations of the Flood in the Bible, but an editorial in a church magazine while W. W. Phelps was editor reflected the common Protestant view of the time. The Flood was seen as a baptism of the earth. But Protestants, it should be noted, see baptism differently than Mormons view baptism. In the LDS Church, baptism is seen as a necessary ordinance for exaltation and includes immersion whereas a Protestant is more likely to view it as a general cleansing carried out in various manners.

By the turn of the century, Elder Orson F. Whitney began writing and speaking about the Flood as a baptism in the sense of a necessary ordinance the earth needed despite its lack of ability to make decisions. This thought has persisted and been debated in LDS circles since that time.

Join Laura Harris Hales of the LDS Perspectives Podcast as she discusses with Paul Hoskisson some of the possible meanings of the Flood story and what it meant for the earth to be cleansed from its environment.

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