

# Did Jesus Believe the Flood was Historical?

A person by the username Tim\_Matter, wrote a genuine and honest portrayal of his loss of faith in the “Christian God being the true God” on the [Biologos forum](#) [emphasis mine]:

“In the end I realized that Noah’s flood never happened at all that started the dominoes falling, ending when I **realized Jesus taught that the flood was real, so Jesus was wrong too.** The flood not being real took out the God believed by most Christians, Jews and Muslims except for the “liberal” versions, and I don’t even know how to think like that.”

This is a very important question and many of us former fundamentalist and evangelical Christians know his pain all too well. If the flood didn’t happen, is Jesus thus a false teacher and we can’t believe what he says? The idea behind the sentiment here is Jesus couldn’t be God and get this issue wrong. Floods certainly happened and the region in question may have experienced devastating and massive floods which led to some stories about a great worldwide flood in the past, but at the end of the day, as it is told in Genesis, this flood story did not happen. The logistical and scientific difficulties are far too many and enormous to accept and many of its details are clearly paralleled in other more ancient flood myths in antiquity (e.g. *Atrahasis*). In addition, genetics definitively rules out the idea all humans today are descended from eight individuals 6,000-50,000 years ago. Arguments for a localized flood are unpersuasive. These cases are made elsewhere on this site so for now I will be assuming the validity of the statement that the Genesis flood account did not happen as a concordist interpretation of Genesis would accept or even as those promoting a localized flood would believe. I want to save the question of Jesus’s knowledge about the flood for the second half of this paper. The first half will be spent addressing the issue of whether or not Jesus taught the flood was real.

## Did Jesus Teach the Flood was Real?

There is actually a bit of scripture in the New Testament pointing to the Genesis Flood. Hebrews 11:7 says that “By faith **Noah**, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world . . . ” and Luke 3:36 lists Noah in Jesus’ genealogy (see also 1 Chronicles 1:4). 1 Peter 3:20 speaks of Noah, the ark and eight people saved while 2 Peter 2:5 tells us the same thing. Not only that but books in the Catholic canon some Protestants label Apocrypha also speak of Noah: Tobit 4:12, Sirach 44:17, 2 Esdras 3:11 and 4 Maccabees 15:31. In several of these cases Noah is admittedly listed with a number of other figures who are considered to have been real people by scripture with no real way of distinguishing between them. Isaiah 54:9 recalls God’s promise after the flood and mentions Noah by name which we also see mentioned in Ezekiel 14. Matthew (24:37-38) and Luke (17:26-27) record the same saying of Jesus: “Just as it was in the days

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of **Noah**, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. . . They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them.”

For many this settles the issue. The Genesis flood must have occurred as described or the Bible is untrustworthy and the Gospel is undermined. I do not disagree with the idea that the New Testament and the Old Testament (with or without the Apocrypha) seems to presuppose the Flood account as legitimate. I think it considers it as real as it does the story of Abraham or Moses but more on the implications of this later. I do strongly disagree with the notion that Jesus or the New Testament *teaches* a literal Genesis flood, however. None of these passages is explicitly teaching the Genesis flood is historical as that was not an issue any of the authors were concerned with. Some of these authors might have assumed or thought the flood occurred exactly as a concordist reading of Genesis would imply, but *thought is not taught*. The historicity of the Genesis account is not in question to any of these authors. It is background knowledge or conventional wisdom they are using to make theological points. The flood is assumed and utilized to make a point. For those who subscribe to Biblical accommodation, you might see where this is obviously headed. God sometimes speaks through ancient views, using the culture and worldviews of the people he is dealing with.

In Hebrews the point of the passage is not to teach us the flood was historical but to point to examples of great faith from Israel’s historic and fabled past. Jesus’ statement is not about the flood. He used this story to emphasize vigilance and being prepared. We could say the same about all of these references to the flood account in the Bible. The flood story would conjure up a powerful image of God’s grace in saving the righteous and his justice being visited upon sinners. It would further serve as a warning to be vigilant and prepared—heeding God’s warnings. Jesus has no interest in modern questions about the historicity of the Flood narratives, whether he accepted them or not. So while Jesus certainly referenced the flood story in his end-time teaching with his apostles, no he did not explicitly *teach* the flood was historical. He appealed to what was simply the conventional wisdom of the day to make a point. Whether or not the flood was actually historical, his point was clearly understood.

It might be a subtle distinction to some but what scripture writers may have correctly or incorrectly *accepted* or *assumed* as background knowledge is certainly distinguishable from what they actually *teach* from within that context. A concordist approach to scripture might assume the background knowledge of scriptural authors must also be correct but there are many places where it is said the earth is immutable and does not move (Chron 16:30; Ps 93:1, 96:10, 104:5; Is 45:8). We now know this background knowledge shared by these Biblical authors was incorrect and these passages could be multiplied many times over. God did not override the primitive background knowledge of the Biblical authors in these instances and many others where a primitive cosmogony is evident. Instead he offered his message through them, through lenses that they and the world around them would understand. God speaks to us on our own level so that we can understand Him. The Bible was written for us, but not to us! John Calvin would agree at times with the notion of Biblical accommodation. When discussing Psalm 136 he wrote:

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"The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other Prophets of popular language, that non might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity, as we will see men sometimes very readily pretend an incapacity to understand, when anything deep or recondite is submitted to their notice . . . the Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned."

The important part of scripture isn't its background assumptions. We need to know them so we can understand the message Scripture is trying to get across but the important part is to consider what God wanted to teach us fallible human sinners through the inspired writings of other fallible human sinners. God chose to accommodate his message and communicate it through limited humans. Jesus appealing to what is a conventional story at the time, background knowledge to Jews, to make a point is hardly outside the scope of this process of divine accommodation. It is consistent with what we see all throughout scripture and the truth Jesus is trying to convey is that we need to persevere and be ready for God's return whenever it is! The validity of Jesus' statement rises or falls with that truth claim, not whether or not the flood account occurred as literally described in Genesis. If I said, "I wish I had the strength of Hercules" this does not necessitate belief that said individual was a real historical figure.

### **Jesus's divinity is not impaired by His Humanity**

A good case can probably be made based on the extant references that many of the NT authors and Jesus would have accepted the legitimacy of the flood account. Does this undermine all of Jesus' teachings? To use a simply analogy, if my mechanic made an error when talking about astrophysics, it would in no sense render him or her incompetent to fix my car. If Jesus came to reconcile us to God, that purpose is not logically undercut by a lack of omniscience on his part and its silly to think if any source of information in life is incorrect on one point, it is unreliable or questionable on all others. People make mistakes and are fallible, but you can still be a trustworthy source on a subject without perfection. Doctors we entrust to deliver our babies are not perfect. We don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater!

While that is all good and true, if we believe Jesus was God, how could we ever ascribe a false belief to him? This is a great question but I think we must really dig deep not let our assumption of who and what Jesus is color what scripture actually says about him. Talking about limitations to Jesus's knowledge can be get uncomfortable but we must hold firm to the fact that Jesus' divinity isn't impaired in any way by His humanity:

**Hebrews 2:17-18:** For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

**Philippians 2:6-8:** <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born

in human likeness. And being found in human form,<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

We believe God lowered himself and became like us in every way. The Human Side of Jesus is undeniable in scripture. He was in a woman's womb for nine months and was born and died like other mortals. We know Jesus grew tired (John 4:5-6), he is seen retreating to quiet places for rest (Mark 6:31,) he experienced hunger (Matthew 21:18), was thirsty (John 19:8 -- unless he merely *claimed* to be in order to fulfill the Scripture), he taught his disciples he would experience pain and suffering (Matthew 16:21), he grew angry as the Temple incident in all four Gospels attests, he slept before stilling the storm (Mark 4:38-40), he faced temptation per the wilderness story and in Gethsemane (Mark 13:32-42) he was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death and fell on the ground multiple times asking that the cup be taken from him. It is rare for epistles to contain historical details about Jesus but in Hebrews we see a similar tradition relayed: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." Jesus also wept at the death of Lazarus and was deeply moved and greatly disturbed by it (John 11). Physically and psychologically, Jesus appears to have been like us in every way but sin.

### Limits to Jesus's Knowledge

Christians believe that Jesus became fully human and I think this suggests there were limitations to his knowledge. What does Scripture say? In the Gospels Jesus himself admits that he did not know the day or the hour of the end time (Mark 13:32, Matthew 24:36) : "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Luke 2:46 doesn't find it odd the missing boy Jesus asks questions of the religious leaders and 2:52 teaches that Jesus had to grow in wisdom: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Not only wisdom but in divine favor. It is as odd for God to grow in God's own favor as it would be for Jesus to pray to himself! His humanity is on full display here. Also, in the incident with the bleeding woman (Mark 5), though the text demonstrates that Jesus clairvoyantly knew someone touched his robe and drew power from him, and probably even suggests he knew the gender of the person in question, He was still unaware as to who touched his robe: "<sup>30</sup> At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched my clothes?'"<sup>31</sup> "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"<sup>32</sup> But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it." Jesus did not know who had touched his robe and he did not know the location of said person. He had to search for her. In Mark 9 Jesus asks the father of the epileptic boy how long he has had this condition (9:14-28) and there is no indication he is making small talk. In Mark 11:13 Jesus investigates a fig tree to see whether or not it has any fruit. He does not omnisciently know this beforehand per Scripture itself: "<sup>13</sup> Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, **he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it.**" We should also recognize that in Mark Jesus' ability to perform miracles was hindered dramatically in his hometown due to a lack of faith (Mark 6:1-6). This was embarrassing to later Christians. Matthew and Luke both copied Mark's shorter text adding to it and each made alterations. Matthew changes "any" to "many" (none to some) and Luke

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just deletes it altogether. Jesus is amazed by what he hears and sees at times (Lk 7:9, Mt 8:10, Mk 6:6). Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane and asking that the cup be taken away from him also makes little sense without admitting some knowledge limitations in regards to certitude about the future. Perhaps this is why GJohn, who seems to portray Jesus as omniscient more so than the synoptics, does not include this scene and literally has Jesus scoff at the notion of asking that the cup being taken away (John 12:27). Jesus sternly warning a man he has just healed to silence about what just happened is at least a bit curious if Jesus knew ahead of time the man would just go out and "proclaim it freely" right after (Mark 1:43-45). Jesus is neither omniscient or omnipotent per many passages in the Gospels.

### **Supernatural Knowledge by Jesus**

There are certainly **many** examples of supernatural knowledge attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus is portrayed as knowing the disciples would scatter beforehand, predicts Peter's denial (Mt 26:34), his resurrection appearances, he knew Judas would betray him all along (Mt 26:25), who would and wouldn't believe in him (John 6:64), he knows the Samaritan woman at the well had five husbands and lives with one she is not married to (John 5:18), many times he knows peoples thoughts even when otherwise he could not have and John 18:4 says he knew all that was to happen to him. These instances could probably be multiplied several times over.

Many Christians side with the portrait provided by the previous paragraph depicting a Jesus who may know everything and then sweep the passages showing Jesus's limitations from the paragraph before that under the rug. This is a difficult matter. As Erickson wrote in *Christian Theology*, "It is difficult to account for the fact that Jesus' knowledge was extraordinary in some matters, but definitely limited in others." I think denying the limitations of Jesus in scripture is a mistake because it is not conceivable to imagine how mainstream Christians in the second half of the first century would invent material that goes against the grain of their beliefs. They would not create this material that could be deemed problematic or embarrassing to them. Why create the source of their own difficulties? In fact, though Luke retains it, when Matthew copies Mark's story about the bleeding woman, he consciously omits the part about Jesus wondering who touched his robe. It is not difficult to surmise why! What this means is all the passages showing Jesus had limitations to his knowledge are bedrock tradition and go very much against the grain of the later evangelists. They cannot be excised or swept away.

A potential way out of this maze would be to look at the picture of Jesus that clearly emerges within the Gospels as a whole and realize that Jesus was constantly in prayer and communion with God the Father. Many of the miracles and supernatural feats of Jesus can just as easily be attributed to his Divine favor and communion with God. He is a very tangible and real model of the power of true faith! The apostles and prophets throughout Scripture are recorded as being miracle workers and shown to have supernatural knowledge through God at times. None to the same level of Jesus but with God these things are certainly possible. How much more so with God's only Son?

If Jesus were alive today is it possible he would misplace his car keys? Would the human Jesus know quantum mechanics? Speak languages he was never introduced to? Understand the fossil

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record and flood geology? For many of us the answer to this question is no or probably not. James Orr in *Revelation and Inspiration* writes:

“No one who thinks seriously on the subject will maintain that, during His earthly life, Jesus carried in His consciousness a knowledge of all events of history, past, present, and future, of all arts and sciences, including the results of our modern astronomies, geologies, biologies, mathematics, of all languages, etc. To suppose this would be to annul the reality of His human consciousness entirely.”

The human Jesus needed to grow in wisdom and learn things as GLuke tells us. The pre-incarnate Word of God is a different matter, theologically speaking. Scripture itself presents a Jesus with both limitations and supernatural feats and abilities. The simplest reconciliation is that these were done through his constant prayer and Jesus’s relationship with the Father. I certainly cannot explain the intricacies of the divine ineffable mystery we call the Incarnation and I do not wish to attempt to offer any sort of full-blown Christology here, but it is quite clear to me that limitations to Jesus’ knowledge are not a problem to his divinity in any way.

#### **Conclusion on Jesus and the Flood:**

Within this context a Jesus who possesses incorrect background knowledge about the Genesis flood can exist snugly within the realm of theological safety. It is not an issue for Christianity as a whole especially since Jesus did not explicitly **teach** a literal Genesis flood. He appealed to the flood account , which he probably **assumed** as genuine as part of his background knowledge, to make a point about being prepared for the end times. Orr writes:

“Ignorance is not error, nor does the one thing necessarily imply the other. That Jesus should use the language of His time on things indifferent, where no judgment or pronouncement of His own was involved, is readily understood; that He should be the victim of illusion, or false judgment, on any subject on which He was called to pronounce, is a perilous assertion.”

The same type of thinking can be extended to the passages where Jesus appears to assume Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. It is important to note as Raymond Brown did that the “evaluation of the gospel evidence given above, if correct, does nothing to detract from the dignity of Jesus. The whole discussion has been predicated on an acceptance of him as “true God of true God.” If in the Gospel reports his knowledge seems to have been limited, such limitation would simply show to what depths divine condescension went in the incarnation—it would show just how human was the humanity of Jesus.”

**Conclusion:** We have now come full circle. Christians who call Jesus their Lord and Savior are not required to accept the flood account as historically true in all its details because Jesus made a literary reference to a widely known story in an attempt to encourage his followers to always remain steadfast and ready for