

**Flood Stories Around the World: Oral Histories, Knowledge Production, and Faith**

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### **Abstract**

The story of the great flood recorded in Genesis 6-9 is familiar to Seventh-day Adventist children and adults alike. It is an easy story to tell but becomes more difficult when we take the story seriously. Was there really a global flood? Did everyone but Noah and his family die? How much of our planet and human history was changed in those months? How can we know? Behind these questions are questions of faith. Can we believe the Bible in a literal sense? How is this story meaningful now? In a brief attempt to address these questions my paper unfolds in three parts. First, we will examine world flood stories and provide a theoretical and analytical approach to understanding and teaching ancient flood narratives. Next, we consider processes of knowledge production and how these myths, oral histories, and narratives while diverse, support the possibility of a global flood event. Last, we will talk about teaching flood stories and how they connect Seventh-day Adventists to local and indigenous communities. While world flood stories are situated in local belief systems and cosmologies, their prevalence and persistence can be not only faith-affirming but helpful for understanding and valuing multiple forms of knowledge production and the knowledge and stories of local and indigenous communities. Together, these approaches can aid in understanding the biblical narrative of the flood in global context, support faith in the biblical account, and foster greater engagement with local communities.

*Key words:* floods, epistemologies, myths, history, inspiration

### **Flood Stories Around the World: Oral Histories, Knowledge Production, and Faith**

The story of the great flood recorded in Genesis 6-9 is familiar to Seventh-day Adventist children and adults alike. It is a foundational and familiar story with the building of the ark and the procession of animals entering two by two. But it becomes difficult when we take the story seriously. Was there really a global flood? Did everyone but Noah and his family die? Was the earth submerged in the deluge? How much of our planet and human history was changed in those months? How do we know? Behind these questions are questions of faith. Can we believe the Bible in a literal sense? How do we talk about the challenges of this story? How important is all of this right now? Through our conversation today, I hope to provide an understanding of the breadth and diversity of flood stories around the world and to offer practical approaches to teaching world flood stories in the context of the global flood narrative recorded in Genesis. We will proceed in three parts. First, we will examine several flood stories and provide a theoretical and analytical approach to understanding and teaching ancient flood narratives. Next, we consider processes of knowledge production and how these myths, oral histories, and narratives while diverse, support the possibility of a global flood event. Last, we will talk about teaching flood stories and how they connect Seventh-day Adventists to local and indigenous communities.

Because much of our conversation today centers on indigenous knowledge, we need to begin by recognizing not only the individuals and communities who hold this knowledge but also their enduring connection to the land and to Country. We begin with a land acknowledgment statement:

I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Owners of the land where we gather today and pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. I recognize their connection to Country and role in caring for and maintaining Country over

thousands of years. May their strength and wisdom be with us today. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and colleagues who may be joining us today. (Education, 2023)

Thank you for being here. My name is Stacie Hatfield. I am a cultural anthropologist at Andrews University in the United States. Anthropology across its multiple subfields is the study of human culture: of all people, in all places, and at all times. In the United States there are four major subfields within anthropology. Archaeology is the study of human culture in the past largely understood as the exciting work of excavating and analyzing artifacts (Muckle & Camp, 2021). Linguistic anthropologists study human culture through language, how language is situated and operates not only within human minds but also between individuals and groups (Stanlaw et al., 2017). Physical or biological anthropologists study culture and what it means to be human through the human body. This includes bioarcheological work to understand previous life ways through an analysis of human skeletal remains and the highly technical genetic work of unraveling histories of human migration and biological change. Evolutionary understandings of human origins are often researched within physical anthropology (Shook et al., 2019) though physical anthropologists have also made vital contributions to our understandings of race as a cultural rather than a biological reality (Barbujani, 2005). Many individuals working in forensics are physical anthropologists. I am a cultural anthropologist. I study human culture in the present. My research includes studies of intersections of race and gender in the United States and gender, community, and archaeology in Jordan. I am a qualitative researcher and an ethnographer. My approach to anthropological inquiry is a critical interpretive one supported by research and theory within and beyond the discipline of anthropology. The interpretive aspect means that human culture is best understood from the inside out and is observable through what the famous

anthropologist and theorist Clifford Geertz called “thick description”; the language, activities, meanings and understandings that we utilize and engage with every day (Geertz, 1973). The interaction we are having in this very moment is rich with social, religious, institutional, and common forms of meaning. The critical aspect of a critical interpretive approach is not one of finding fault or of angry debate. Rather, a critical approach compels its scholars to closely examine our social worlds, paying particular attention to relationships of power, in order to improve the lives of those around us and to foster human thriving. I am also a Seventh-day Adventist, a student of the scriptures and a devoted follower of Christ. It is important for you to know these things about me in order to understand my approach to this topic. I am interested in human culture and experiences. I work to understand them from an insider’s perspective though, as a white middle-class, middle-aged, cis-gendered, American woman, I am often an outsider to the cultures and experiences I am working to understand. Ethnography is therefore a vital research method. Through talking with people, by spending extended periods of time with them, through hearing their understandings and interpretations of their experiences, I can as an anthropologist, better learn about the many ways there are to be human. As a believer speaking and learning with others, broadens my understandings of the vastness of God and of his work on our planet and with us, the people and communities who share it. So, I am delighted to examine world flood stories with you today. This is a subject that has filled books, so our session is not an exhaustive examination of the topic. We have just enough time to do four things. First, to learn about world flood stories and to consider how we know what we know. Second, to consider how these stories, while diverse, support the possibility of a global flood event. Third, to talk through teaching flood stories and fourth, to talk about how world flood stories connect Seventh-day Adventists to indigenous communities.

### World flood stories

Globally there are more than two hundred flood stories separated by oceans, found on every continent aside from Antarctica, and across diverse cultural groups. From Europe and the Middle East, to Africa and Australia, from both North and South America and Asia, stories of a global flood are retained in well-known as well as obscure places (Isaak, 2002). The Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism know the story of the flood through the story of Noah (*The Holy Qur'an: Arabic text and English translation*, 2021; *New International Version*, 2021). It is recorded in the Bible and in the Torah in Genesis 6-9 and in Suras 11 and 71 in the Quran. These three faith traditions encompass much of the world in terms of belief. But there are many flood stories outside of these traditions as well. These are analytically important precisely because the Christian Bible, the Jewish Torah, and the Muslim Quran are Abrahamic. They have a known shared origin. It makes a difference then, to know whether there are other stories, oral histories, or myths of world flood events that could provide supporting evidence for the flood stories of the Abrahamic traditions; stories that could indicate a shared human experience retained in cultural memory. The answer to whether there are such stories is yes. There are many. From Scandinavia to the British Isles, from Babylon to Egypt, across Africa, Asia, and the Americas there are stories, oral histories, and myths of great flood events. Because rain can fall in large amounts, and not all stories indicate a global flood, some of these stories may refer to large but more local flood events. But a significant number of the stories include the idea that the waters covered most or nearly all of the earth. In a 2001 survey of flood stories by John Morris and the Institute for Creation Research, Morris found that of the approximately two hundred stories he examined, 95% referenced a global flood in which a favored family (88%) survived by way of a boat (70%). In 66% of the stories the flood was predicted as a result of human

wickedness. In 67% of the narratives, animals were saved. Animals played a part in 73% of the stories. Features do vary though. Rainbows are only mentioned in 7% of the stories and eight being the number of persons saved is only mentioned in 13% (Morris, 2001). Morris's work is important though because it catalogs world flood stories and locates common features that connect the stories with each other.

Of the world's flood stories, the oldest and best-known is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The earliest Sumerian Gilgamesh poems date from as early as the Third dynasty of Ur (2100–2000 BC). One of these poems mentions Gilgamesh's journey to meet the flood hero, as well as a version of the flood story as well as other stories. The flood story was included because in it, the flood hero Utnapishtim is granted immortality by the gods which fits the immortality theme of the epic. Tablet XI was found in Nineveh and dates to the Neo-Assyrian period of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The writing is Akkadian cuneiform, and the tablet is currently kept in the British museum. The translation by Maureen Gallery Kovacs reads as follows:

Ea leaks the secret plan

1. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh a secret story that begins in the old city of Shuruppak on the banks of the Euphrates River.
2. The "great gods" Anu, Enlil, Ninurta, Ennugi, and Ea were sworn to secrecy about their plan to cause the flood.
3. But the god Ea (Sumerian god Enki) repeated the plan to Utnapishtim through a reed wall in a reed house.
4. Ea commanded Utnapishtim to demolish his house and build a boat, regardless of the cost, to keep living beings alive.

5. The boat must have equal dimensions with corresponding width and length and be covered over like Apsu boats.
6. Utnapishtim promised to do what Ea commanded.
7. He asked Ea what he should say to the city elders and the population.
8. Ea tells him to say that Enlil has rejected him and he can no longer reside in the city or set foot in Enlil's territory.
9. He should also say that he will go down to the Apsu "to live with my lord Ea".

#### Building and launching the boat

1. Carpenters, reed workers, and other people assembled one morning.
2. [missing lines]
3. Five days later, Utnapishtim laid out the exterior walls of the boat of 120 cubits.
4. The sides of the superstructure had equal lengths of 120 cubits. He also made a drawing of the interior structure.
5. The boat had six decks [?] divided into seven and nine compartments.
6. Water plugs were driven into the middle part.
7. Punting poles and other necessary things were laid in.
8. Three times 3,600 units of raw bitumen were melted in a kiln and three times 3,600 units of oil were used in addition to two times 3,600 units of oil that were stored in the boat.
9. Oxen and sheep were slaughtered and ale, beer, oil, and wine were distributed to the workmen, like at a new year's festival.
10. When the boat was finished, the launch was very difficult. A runway of poles was used to slide the boat into the water.
11. Two-thirds of the boat was in the water.



12. Utnapishtim loaded his silver and gold into the boat.
13. He loaded "all the living beings that I had."
14. His relatives and craftsmen, and "all the beasts and animals of the field" boarded the boat.
15. The time arrived, as stated by the god Shamash, to seal the entry door.

The storm

1. Early in the morning at dawn a black cloud arose from the horizon.
2. The weather was frightful.
3. Utnapishtim boarded the boat and entrusted the boat and its contents to his boat master Puzurammurri who sealed the entry.
4. The thunder god Adad rumbled in the cloud and storm gods Shullat and Hanish went over mountains and land.
5. Erragal pulled out the mooring poles and the dikes overflowed.
6. The Anunnaki gods lit up the land with their lightning.
7. There was stunned shock at Adad's deeds which turned everything to blackness. The land was shattered like a pot.
8. All day long the south wind blew rapidly and the water overwhelmed the people like an attack.
9. No one could see his fellows. They could not recognize each other in the torrent.
10. The gods were frightened by the flood and retreated up to the Anu heaven. They cowered like dogs lying by the outer wall.
11. Ishtar shrieked like a woman in childbirth.

12. The Mistress of the gods wailed that the old days had turned to clay because "I said evil things in the Assembly of the Gods, ordering a catastrophe to destroy my people who fill the sea like fish."
13. The other gods were weeping with her and sat sobbing with grief, their lips burning, parched with thirst.
14. The flood and wind lasted six days and six nights, flattening the land.
15. On the seventh day, the storm was pounding [intermittently?] like a woman in labour.

#### Calm after the storm

1. The sea calmed and the whirlwind and flood stopped. All day long there was quiet. All humans had turned to clay.
2. The terrain was as flat as a rooftop. Utnapishtim opened a window and felt fresh air on his face.
3. He fell to his knees and sat weeping, tears streaming down his face. He looked for coastlines on the horizon and saw a region of land.
4. The boat lodged firmly on mount Nimush which held the boat for several days, allowing no swaying.
5. On the seventh day he released a dove that flew away but came back to him. He released a swallow, but it also came back to him.
6. He released a raven that was able to eat and scratch, and did not circle back to the boat.
7. He then sent his livestock out in various directions. (Kovacs, 1989)

In this reading we see a number of elements familiar to us from the Genesis account. There are a number of differences as well. Both stories contain a predicted flood, the building of an ark, the saving of animals and the destruction of the world. A key difference is the pantheon of gods

mentioned as well as their various responses to the flood. While Genesis 6:5-6 tells of a God whose heart was filled with grief at the wickedness of the world there is no hint of fear. The God of Genesis moves with intention and full control while the gods of the Epic of Gilgamesh fear for their own lives. These differences may represent differing positionalities among supernatural beings. It may reflect the personas of the cultural gods of Gilgamesh. Similarities and differences in the stories. While there are many other flood stories, I want to bring you two only two more. One from the United States, from Michigan where Andrews University is located. And one from here in Australia. I offer these particular stories because they connect us with the land we live on and with the people who live here and have lived here before us.

Quite a number of creation and flood stories appear Australian aboriginal oral history with a variety of story lines and characters including the now popularized story of Tiddalik, the frog who caused a flood by first drinking all of the water then spitting out when made to laugh by the other animals (Victoria, 2023). But the Bundaba flood story contains elements most familiar to the biblical narrative. The story was collected by Howard Coates and W.H. Douglas as told by Jimmy Bird. It reads as follows:

Long, long ago there was a great flood. It originated from the fact of some children who found the 'winking' owl in a tree and plucked out all its feathers. They forced a grass reed through its nose and treated the bird most shamefully. The bird flew without wings, into the heavens and showed himself to Ngowungu, the Great Father. Ngowungu became very angry and decided to drown the people. Later the people saw a small cloud rising which grew bigger and bigger till it spread all over the sky. The thunder began to roll and crash and the people were greatly afraid. With the rain and thunder was a terrible wind which broke great limbs off trees and rooted up others.

During this terrible storm there was a noise above the awful crashes of thunder. This noise was coming from the north. The salt water, the sea, came pouring over the ranges from the north. The flood rose higher and higher till all the land was covered except the tops of two or three mountains. From further west a man and his wives with a dog were battling their way in a canoe when a bird with a leaf in its mouth flew in front of them showing them the way to Mt. Broome. They eventually reached Mt. Broome and landed there where some other survivors were. Then Djabalgari, the great left-handed man incised his little finger and let the blood trickle down into the flood waters. The waters began to go down and eventually disappeared off the country. All other people were drowned.” (Douglas & Coates, 1981)

This story again contains familiar elements: shameful behavior, an angry god, a great flood, a boat, a dog and a bird, a mountain, and the death of all but a few. Again, there are differences, but this story comes from this place and was told here before settler colonialization from Europe began, before the missionaries, before the railroads, before cities and seaside conferences on faith and earth history. This story predates us. It was here before, like the people who remember it.

The third flood story I want to share with you comes from the United States, from the people of the Council of the Three Fires – the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi: Indigenous nations of the Great Lakes. Most of the people of the Council of the Three Fires were forcibly removed from the Great Lakes region, members of the Potawatomi gained the right to stay by negotiating difficult treaties and in part by converting to Catholicism. The Potawatomi tribe has tribal land and a tribal headquarters in Dowagiac, Michigan about twenty minutes from

Andrews University by car. Andrews University was built on land that once belonged to the Potawatomi people. We are part of their displacement. The story of The Great Flood is found in the Mishomis Book written by Eddie Benton Banai. I bring you their story:

Although life was often hard for them, for many years the first people lived together in harmony with all of Creation.

I regret to say that this harmonious way of life on Earth did not last forever. Men and Woman did not continue to give each other the respect needed to keep the Sacred Hoop of marriage strong. Families began quarreling with each other. Finally villages began arguing back and forth. People began to fight over hunting grounds. Brothers turned against brother and began killing each other. It greatly saddened the Creator, Gitchie Manito, to see the Earth's people turn to evil ways. It seemed that the entire Creation functioned in harmony except for the people who were the last to be placed there. For a long time Gichie Manito waited hoping that the evil ways would cease and that brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect for all things would come to rule over the people. When it seemed that there was no hope left, Gichie Manito decided to purify the Earth. He would do this with water. The water came like a mush-ko-be-wun' (flood) upon the Earth (aki) The flood came so fast that it caught the entire Creation off guard. Most all living things were drowned immediately, but some of the animals were able to keep swimming, trying to find a small bit of land which to rest. Some of the birds were caught in the air and had to keep flying in order to stay alive. The purification of the Earth with water appeared to be complete. All the evil that had built up in the hearts of the first people had been washed away.

But how could life on Mother Earth begin anew?

There are many Ojibwe teachings that refer to a man named "Way-na-boo'-zhoo." Some people have actually referred to Anishinabe or Original Man as Waynaboozhoo. Most of the elders agree that Waynaboozhoo was not really a man but was a spirit who had many adventures during the early years of the Earth. Some people say that Waynaboozhoo provided the link through which human form was gradually given to the spiritual beings of the Earth. Everyone agrees that Waynaboozhoo had many human-like characteristics. He made mistakes at times just like we did. But he also learned from his mistakes so that he could accomplish things and become better at living in harmony with the Earth. These things that Waynaboozhoo learned were later to become very useful to Indian people. He has been looked upon as kind of a hero by the Ojibwe.

These "Waynaboozhoo Stories" have been told for many years to children to help them grow in a balanced way. In our teachings from now on, we will use the name "Waynaboozhoo" to refer to the spirit of Anishnabe or Original Man. The teachings about how a new Earth was created after the Great Flood is one of the classic Waynaboozhoo Stories. It tells of how Waynaboozhoo managed to save himself by resting on a chi-mi-tig' (huge log) that was floating on the vast expanse of water that covered Mother Earth. As he floated along on this log, some of the animals that were able to keep swimming came to rest on the log. They would rest for a while and then let another swimming animal take their place. It was the same way with the winged creatures. They would take turns resting on the log and flying. It was through this kind of sacrifice and concern for one another that Waynaboozhoo and large group of birds and four-leggeds were able to save themselves on the great log. They floated for a long time but could gain no sight of land. Finally, Waynaboozhoo spoke to the animals.

"I am going to do something," he said. "I am going to swim to the bottom of this water and grab a handful of Earth. With this small bit of Earth, I believe we can create a new land for us to live on with the help of the Four Winds and Gitchi Manito." So Waynaboozhoo dived into the water. He was gone for a long time. Some of the animals began to cry for they thought that Waynaboozhoo must have drowned trying to reach the bottom. At last, the animals caught sight of some bubbles of air, and finally, Waynaboozhoo came to the top of the water. Some of the animals helped him onto the log. Waynaboozhoo was so out of breath that he could not speak at first. When he regained his strength, he spoke to the animals. "The water is too deep ...I never reached the bottom... I cannot swim fast enough or hold my breath long enough to make it to the bottom." All the animals on the log were silent for a long time.

Mahng (the loon) who was swimming alongside the log was the first to speak. "I can dive under the water for a long ways, for that is the way I catch my food. I will try to dive to the bottom and get some of the Earth in my beak." The loon dived out of sight and was gone for a long time. The other animals felt sure he had drowned, but the loon floated to the top of the water. He was very weak and out of breath. "I couldn't make it," he gasped. "There appears to be no bottom to this water." Next Zhing-gi-biss' (the helldiver) came forth. "I will try to swim to the bottom," he said. "I am known to dive at great depths." The helldiver was gone for a very long time. When the animals and Waynaboozhoo were about to give up hope, they saw the helldiver's body come floating to the top. He was unconscious and Waynaboozhoo had to pull him onto the log and help him regain his breath. When the helldiver came to, he spoke to all the animals on the log.

"I am sorry my brothers and sisters. I, too, could not reach the bottom although I swam for a long ways straight down."

Many of the animals offered themselves to do the task that was so important to the future of all life on Earth. Zhon-gwayzh' (the mink) tried but could not make it to the bottom. Ni-gig' (the otter) tried and failed. Even Mi-zhee-kay' (the turtle) tried but was unsuccessful. All seemed hopeless. It appeared that the water was so deep that no living thing could reach the bottom. Then a soft, muffled voice was heard. "I'll try," it said softly. At first, no one could see who it was that spoke. The little Wa-zhushk' (muskrat) stepped forth. "I'll try," he said again. Some of the animals laughed and poked each other. The helldiver jeered, "If I couldn't make it how can he expect to do any better?"

Waynaboozhoo spoke, "Hold it everyone! It is not our place to judge the merits of another; that task belongs to the Creator. If little muskrat wants to try, I feel we should let him."

The muskrat dived down and disappeared from view. He was gone for such a long time that Waynaboozhoo and all the animals on the log were certain that muskrat had given up his life in trying to reach the bottom. The muskrat was able to make it to the bottom of the water. He was already very weak from lack of air. He grabbed some Earth in his paw and with every last bit of strength he could muster, muskrat pushed away from the bottom. One of the animals on the log caught sight of muskrat as he floated to the water's surface. They pulled his body onto the log. Waynaboozhoo examined the muskrat. "Brothers and sisters," Waynaboozhoo said, "Our little brother tried to go without air for to long. He is dead." A song of mourning and praise was heard over all the water as Wa-zhushk's spirit passed to the next world.



Waynaboozhoo spoke again, "Look! Muskrat has something in his paw. It is closed tight around something." Waynaboozhoo carefully pried open muskrat's tiny paw. All the animals gathered around trying to see. Muskrat's paw opened and there, in a little ball, was a piece of Earth. All the animals cheered! Muskrat had sacrificed his life so that life could begin anew on the Earth. Waynaboozhoo took the piece of Earth from muskrat's paw. At that moment, Mi-zhee-kay' (the turtle) swam forward and said, "Use my back to bear the weight of this new Earth. With the help of the Creator, we can make a new Earth."

Waynaboozhoo put the piece of Earth on the turtle's back. All of a sudden the noon-di-noon' (winds) began to blow. The wind blew from each of the Directions. The tiny piece of Earth on the turtle's back began to grow. Larger and larger it became, until it formed a mi- ni-si' (island) in the water. Still the Earth grew but still the turtle bore its weight on his back.

Waynaboozhoo began to sing a song. All the animals began to dance in a circle on the growing island. As he sang, they danced in an ever widening circle. Finally the winds ceased to blow and the waters became still. A huge island sat in the middle of the great water.

Today traditional Indian people sing special songs and dance in a circle in memory of this event. Indian people also give special honor to our brother, the turtle. He bore the weight of the new Earth on his back and made life possible for the Earth second people.

To this day, the ancestors of our brother, the muskrat have been given good life. No matter what marches have been drained and their homes destroyed in the name of

progress, the muskrat continue to multiply and grow. The Creator has made it so that the muskrats will always be with us because of the sacrifice that our little brother made for all of us many years ago when the Earth was covered with water. The muskrat do their part today in remembering the Great Flood; they build their homes in the shape of the little ball of Earth and the island that was formed from it. (Benton-Banai, 2010)

This story is different from the other two in that the most of the characters are animals. There is a God, the Great Creator, a man, great evil and the cleansing of the flood. This story uniquely features themes that are replayed in Potawatomi dance and moral ideals, themes of collaboration, courage, sacrifice and the importance of animals in the making of the world.

Myths are important. Often these narratives provide varied accounts of witnessed or remembered events. When retold or placed alongside each other, they are significant to understanding shared histories and what it means to be human. Stories of the great flood are just this kind of narrative. Elements shared between them and the traces of them left not only in our collective memories, but in the earth around us, shed light on real stories, events that profoundly inform our understandings of who we are, where we come from, as well as the possibilities for a God who moves and works in our world. In addition, they highlight the importance of oral history and storytelling as valid forms of research and knowledge production. They prompt an appreciation of local and indigenous knowledge and communities: people who have carried these stories through millennia. The story of the flood as outlined in Genesis is well known across the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Flood stories beyond these faith traditions are found throughout the world including in the stories and cosmologies of indigenous communities in the South Pacific and in the Great Lakes region of the United States. The global prevalence of these stories in oral histories and indigenous narratives beyond the Abrahamic

faiths are important for examining the possibility of a large-scale or global flood event and for considering how the knowledge of such event would be created and retained. Storytelling is a form of knowledge production and knowledge preservation key to the transmission of knowledge and culture in the past and today. Hearing these stories retold brings us nearer to the people who told them and to the experiences that shaped their understandings of the world. It helps us to reflect upon our own cosmologies, myths, and traditions. But what do these stories mean in the context of faith? Are they helpful or are they other people's myths? These questions require us to talk about how we know what we know. They require us to talk about epistemology.

### **How we know what we know**

Epistemology is the study of knowledge production, of how we know what we know. While we, as good sons and daughters of the Enlightenment value the scientific method, most of what we know, we know by authority, because someone we trust told us. For instance, I am fairly certain that the first World War took place, not because I was there or saw it, but because my teachers taught me about it. I believe the Egyptian pyramids exist, not because I have been to them yet, but because people I trust have seen them. I believe my dad is my father not because he has undergone paternity testing, but because my mother said so and he agrees. Some of the most important knowledge we have, we have on authority. The scientific method is an incredibly powerful tool for producing knowledge though it is not without bias or limitations. Questions like "What do our collective stories mean?" are unanswerable using the scientific method. That is why qualitative researcher methods are so important. Other ways of knowing are tradition, and memory, sometimes imbedded in our bodies. Having played a guitar piece many times, my fingers often know before I do they fall on the strings. Knowledge production is important and

equally important are the diverse ways in which we produce knowledge. In the case of flood stories, we collect and analyze the number of stories, noting where they come from and the traditions that may have influenced the features and themes of each story. We learn about the people who remember them and who tell them. We look at how they are pressed into clay or written onto a scroll. From a secular perspective these stories speak of diverse human cosmologies, histories, and forms of knowledge production and preservation. They tell of the shared human experience of environmental disaster and recovery. From a faith perspective, they provide broad and diverse accounts of a significant flood event or events. They speak in various and diverse ways of a shared human narrative.

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* first published in 1949, Joseph Campbell proposes a theory of mythological structure of the journey of the archetypal hero found in world myths in which a” hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell, 2012). The structure of hero stories found around the world follows this arch-narrative. Campbell draws from theories in psychology to explain the global presence of this structure and his work has influenced writers and artists today. We easily recognize the shape of this arc in many of our favorite stories and George Lucas acknowledges the influence of Joseph Campbell in his creation of the Star Wars movies. A scholar in English literature with love of languages and mythology, writer and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis describes the vital connection between myth and theology in his lecture titled “Is theology poetry?” written in 1944 for the Oxford debating society called the Socrates Club. Lewis says:

Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians and (earlier) to Jews, also says that there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, “lighteneth every man.” We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpses of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story – the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth. And the differences between the Pagan Christs (Balder, Osiris, etc.) and the Christ Himself is much what we should expect to find. The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other. It is like watching something come gradually into focus; first it hangs in the clouds of myth and ritual, vast and vague, then it condenses, grows hard and in a sense small, as a historical event in first century Palestine. (Lewis, 2014)

Both Lewis and Campbell write to explain common story arcs or themes in theology and in mythic literature. Lewis argues that these commonalities do not make theology or the Bible myth, but rather, they support theology through the presence of myths.

Time and telling can change stories. Other factors can impact stories too, like food scarcity, disasters, encounters with the supernatural (remember Adventists believe that we have a very real enemy in the world who also shapes not only our lives and experiences but also our understandings and interpretations of them.) So, some of the stories world’s flood stories are

strange, with mythical animals or characters and events that do not seem closely connected with reality as we know it. These are the less clear or shadowy narratives that C.S. Lewis talks about yet they contain essential pieces of truth and they are important for the truths they convey. They can be analyzed and contextualized as cultural history, cosmology, or myth with meaning for the communities who carry them and the people who tell them but may have less relevance for those outside of the culture the stories are kept by.

How are these stories important to Seventh-day Adventists now? These stories are important and valuable in their own right. They are honored, retold, and preserved through the communities where they have been kept for hundreds or thousands of years. In addition, their presence provides supporting evidence of a shared human experience of a great flood told across time, people groups, and the vastness of the continents.

A last thing to consider as we talk about epistemology is how the knowledge of such an event could be retained in the current context? If a global flood event occurred today, how would we know? As the clouds gather and rain begins to fall, meteorologists and news casters would begin to talk about it. We might see images popping up on social media. As the rain and flooding made significant impacts, videos would go viral and emergency protocols would begin to be put into place. As the great waters of the deep broke forth footage of mudslides, then sinking cities would reach those of us who still had internet connection and working power grids. As those finally gave way, as cell phones escaped into the waters and buildings of servers washed away, as the internet went quiet and there was nothing but the wind and water, how would we know how extensive the damage was? How many had been killed? What was left? Only a view from space watching as the earth revolves would confirm a global flood and there would be no way to tell anyone on earth. The evidence would come in the aftermath as having lost our cars, our

aircraft, and our communication systems, we walked our mud-caked planet, witnessed the destruction, and told our stories. The possibility is horrible to consider but strangely enough, those stories are just what we have. Stories from individuals and communities who spread out from the resting arc. Who wandered far from the histories of Eden and the fall, and of a God who promised salvation but whose stories retained the memory of the flood. This is actually what we should expect to see if such an event had taken place. They are what we would be left with, if such an event happened to us. These stories are incredibly valuable not only as cultural history for the people who hold them, but also for us as believers, and as a way of ethnographically documenting a shared human experience. They provide diverse and scattered accounts of an event the Bible provides a more detailed history for.

### **Teaching shared narratives and building connections**

Given the importance of these stories and our commitment to teach the Bible including the story of the flood we should talk about pedagogy, about teaching flood stories and how world flood stories connect Seventh-day Adventists to broader communities. We can begin with teaching world flood stories, including them in our social science and world literature curriculum as a way of understanding diverse human stories connected to our own. These analysis can highlight the shared features across the accounts and discuss variations in the stories as well. World flood stories provide research reliability to our analysis of the flood. We can see that while there are differences in mythology and cosmology yet accounts of a flood including common features and themes remain constant. The biblical account of the flood uses a historical narrative form of writing. It is not written in a symbolic or mythic style, and we have examples of symbolic writing in the visions of Ezekiel and John. It is not written as poetry. We have historic events retold in poetry in Deborah's song after the battle with Sisera in Judges 4-5 and in

the song of Moses after the parting of the Red Sea, Exodus 14-15. In both cases, the story is told in historic narrative form then retold in poetry and song. The flood story found in Genesis is not told in poetry or symbol or in the style of mythic cosmology like many world flood stories. The style of writing employed in Genesis is a style used for telling of historical events. So, while Genesis provides a historical account of a global flood, flood stories around the world corroborate in poetic and mythical ways, the central truth of a large flood event. (Remember that it would be very difficult given the technology they had to verify a global flood.) The inclusion of these stories in our discussions is important because, though diverse, these narratives exist across time and place as accounts of large-scale flood events profoundly shaping the histories of those who experienced them. Together they support the possibility of a large-scale flood event of the kind found in Genesis. It is important that we tell them.

Last, I propose that recognizing and teaching Seventh-day Adventist faith as connected to the stories, beliefs, and histories of local communities invites a broader view of divine workings throughout human history and human social life. Rather than viewing indigenous and native people as excluded from a knowledge of God, as excluded from his providence, and working, we can recognize that God has left evidence of himself and of his work in their stories too. We are all his people. We breathe the breath he gives us. We live with the life he bestows. We remember and tell stories because he created not only Western minds but humankind with the ability and tendency to do so. And when we look throughout the Bible, we find that God also is a great storyteller. When he remembers history, tells kingdom truths, or speaks of the future, He does so powerfully and beautifully in ways that people remember, through story.

So, I suggest three reasons for the importance of teaching diversely shared flood narratives with students and to non-academic audiences. First, the inclusion of these stories in



our discussions is important because, though diverse, these narratives exist across time and place as accounts of large-scale flood events profoundly shaping the histories of those who experienced them. Together they support the possibility of a large-scale flood event of the kind found in Genesis. Second, discussions of epistemology, of how we know what we know matters. If such an event happened today, how would we know, and share the knowledge of our experiences given the catastrophic nature of such an event? How do existing flood stories compare to those that might be created if such an event happened today? These stories provide qualitative ethnographic support for a great flood as a common theme across ancient cosmologies, myths, oral histories, and historical narratives. Third, I propose that recognizing Seventh-day Adventist faith as connected to the stories, beliefs, and histories of local communities invites a broader view of divine workings throughout human history and human social life. While flood narratives are situated in diverse belief systems and cosmologies, their prevalence and diverse origins can be not only faith-affirming but helpful for understanding and valuing diverse forms of knowledge production and the knowledge and stories of local and indigenous communities. We can learn gratitude for aboriginal, indigenous, and native communities who retain and preserve these stories. We can recognize oral history and myth as valid forms of knowledge production involving culture but linked to history and the story of our shared planet. We can learn to share it together better, to resist ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, and to better understand our interconnectedness as humankind.

### **Conclusion**

My hope today has been to provide an understanding of the breadth and diversity of world flood stories and to offer practical approaches to teaching world flood stories in the context of the global flood narrative recorded in Genesis. Our goal was to broadly discuss four

aspects of world flood stories. First, to recount three world flood stories and to consider how we know what we know. Second, to consider how these stories, while diverse, support the possibility of a global flood event. Third, to talk through teaching flood stories and fourth, to talk practically about how world flood stories connect Seventh-day Adventists to indigenous communities. Considering world flood stories in these ways allows us to understand the biblical narrative of the flood in global context, to support faith in the biblical account, and to foster greater engagement with local communities. While flood narratives are situated in diverse belief systems and cosmologies, their prevalence and global presence can be faith-affirming and helpful for understanding and valuing diverse forms of knowledge production and the knowledge and stories of local and indigenous communities.

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**Table 1**

Comparative table for flood stories (Morris, 2001)

Story element	Percentage present
Favored Family	88%
Forewarning	66%
Human behavior as cause	66%
Catastrophe only a flood	95%
Global flooding	95%
Survival by boat	70%
Animals saved	57%
Animals play any part	73%
Survivors on a mountain	57%
Geography was local	82%
Birds sent out	35%
Rainbow mentioned	7%
Survivors offer sacrifice	13%
Eight persons saved	9%