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## DOES THE BIBLE SPEAK OF A VAPOR CANOPY?

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### ABSTRACT

Many commentators have stated that the Bible does not clearly speak of an antediluvian vapor canopy. The contention of this paper is that the vapor canopy is specifically mentioned in scripture, and the descriptive Hebrew word is mabbul. This insight allows us to understand the Creation and Flood narratives better.

A vapor canopy about the antediluvian earth has been proposed occasionally through the centuries. Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate (c. A.D. 400), described a canopy, compactae et densiores aquae.(1) White infers this to mean a canopy of ice.(2) Immanuel Kant suggested more than two centuries ago that the Flood might have been caused by the collapse of a vapor "ring,"(3) an idea later proposed independently by Isaac N. Vail in 1874.(4) Dillow recently hypothesized a forty-foot column of water vapor six miles above the earth.(5)

Some proponents like a watery canopy; others prefer an icy model. But does the Bible suggest a canopy at all?

The following verses, when read together, particularly in a literal translation, are enough to cause one to suspect a canopy of some sort: Gen. 1:6,7; 2:5,6,10; 3:8; 6:17; 7:6-12,17; 8:2; 9:11,15,28; 10:1,32; 11:10; Psalms 18:11; 29:10; and 2 Peter 3:5,6.

Gen. 1:2 depicts a geoidal earth totally covered with water. Two Hebrew words, t<sup>e</sup>hom, normally translated "the deep," and hamayim, "the waters," are both found in verse two. Driver says that t<sup>e</sup>hom as used here does not mean what the deep or the sea would denote to the modern world, but rather "the primitive undivided waters, the huge watery mass which the writer conceived as enveloping the earth."(6) These waters pictured in verse 2 completely covered our planet, forming a hydrosphere upon the earth and apparently a hot, steamy atmosphere above "the face of the waters"--an utterly uninhabitable chaos. Such is the condition of the earth as the Spirit of God initiates His first creative act on Day One.

Following the creation of light, God deals with t<sup>e</sup>hom, the bathic deep. Two acts are necessary: the separation of the waters above the earth from the waters below, and the raising of the land and the forcing of the oceans into their allotted areas. In verse 7 "God made the sky [firmament]," and He used the sky to "separate [i.e., establish order between] the waters under the sky from the waters above the sky." The words of verse 7 thus describe the establishment of the antediluvian vapor canopy. Without a perception of this canopy, Bible students are mystified about the significance of the second day's work.

"The waters above" were called mabbul, a specific Hebrew designation to distinguish the canopy from the waters below, t<sup>e</sup>hom, the oceans. Although mabbul is not specifically used in chapter one, it does appear subsequently, particularly in the Flood narrative, as later biblical material correctly recalls the canopy's former existence. Von Rad exegetes the scripture brilliantly.

An understanding ...of the Flood depends materially on the correct translation of the word mabbul. Mabbul does not mean "flood," "inundation," or even "destruction," but it is a technical term for a part of the world structure, namely, the heavenly ocean. This heavenly sea, which is above the firmament (raqia'), empties downward... We must understand the Flood, therefore, as a catastrophe involving the entire cosmos. When the heavenly ocean breaks forth upon the earth below, and the primeval sea beneath the earth, which is

restrained by God, now freed from its bonds, gushes up through yawning chasms onto the earth, then there is a destruction of the entire cosmic system according to biblical cosmogony. The two halves of the chaotic primeval sea, separated--the one up, the other below--by God's creative government, are again united; creation begins to sink again into chaos. Here the catastrophe, therefore, concerns not only men and beasts ..., but the earth--indeed, the entire cosmos.(7)

Mabbul then is the specific term for "the waters above," and our English versions should use the words "the canopy" or an appropriate synonym each time mabbul appears. Brown, Driver & Briggs, in their classic Hebrew lexicon, state that mabbul "seems...to be almost a proper name..."(8) Indeed, twice it appears without the definite article, suggesting its use as a proper name. The word is found 13 times in the Old Testament, and it is commonly mistranslated, as von Rad notes. Translating all but mabbul in these passages, we see as follows:

- (1) For behold, I will bring mabbul of waters upon the earth... (Gen. 6:17a).
- (2) Noah was six hundred years old when mabbul of waters came upon the earth (Gen. 7:6).
- (3) And Noah...went into the ark, to escape the waters of mabbul (Gen. 7:7).
- (4) And after seven days the waters of mabbul came upon the earth (Gen. 7:10).
- (5) Mabbul continued forty days upon the earth (Gen. 7:17a).
- (6) ...[N]ever again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of mabbul,
- (7) and there is no longer mabbul to wipe out the earth (Gen. 9:11b,c).
- (8) ...No longer shall there be the waters--namely, mabbul--to wipe out all flesh (Gen. 9:15b).
- (9) After mabbul Noah lived three hundred and fifty years (Gen. 9:28).
- (10) ...[S]ons were born to them after mabbul (Gen. 10:1b).
- (11) ...[A]nd from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after mabbul (Gen. 10:32b).
- (12) ...[H]e became the father of Arpachshad two years after mabbul (Gen. 11:10c).
- (13) The LORD sat enthroned over mabbul; the LORD is enthroned as King forever (Psalms 29:10).1(9)

2 Peter 3:5-13, which is such a helpful New Testament commentary on the Creation and the Flood, also confirms the two "waters"--t<sup>e</sup>hom and mabbul:

...[A]n earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which [Gk. di hon, plural] the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished"<sup>2</sup> (2 Peter 3:5c,6).

The writer's choice of the genitive plural "which" shows his astute perception of the actual conditions prior to the Flood. He had not lost the racial memory of the antediluvian vapor canopy.

When God spoke to Noah in Gen. 6:17--"For behold, I will bring mabbul of waters upon the earth..."--Noah would have had at least some comprehension of what he was being told. His attention was called to the canopy above. Was it a hazy vapor? Was it an icy ring similar to those of the Jovian planets, particularly Saturn? Noah was quite aware of mabbul, whatever its appearance; but, had God merely told Noah, "...I will send rain upon the earth" (Gen. 7:4a), the bewildered man might well have responded as did Bill Cosby in his famous--serendipitously accurate--impersonation of Noah: "What's rain?" The novel phenomenon of the rainbow is confirmatory of the proposition that Noah indeed had probably never experienced rainfall before the Deluge.

The earth-age of Adam-to-Noah was apparently, from a climatic standpoint, quite pleasant and rather uniformly warm. Both biblical and paleontological evidences confirm this condition. A number of authors deal with this subject, as Whitcomb and Morris(10) and Dillow.(11)

Mabbul was clearly a friendly attribute of the antediluvian earth, greatly enhancing Lifespans and physical growth.

Although not included within the scope of this paper, we should realize that the far greater damage to the earth by the Deluge was accomplished, not by the condensing canopy, but by the volcanic "fountains of the great deep" (Gen. 7:11), erupting at the bottom of the ocean, spewing enormous tsunamis across the earth intermittently over a period of seven-and-a-half months.(12)

As may be seen from Gen. 9:11 and 9:15, mabbul no longer exists; it was condensed out during the Flood several millennia ago. Today the atmosphere scarcely contains even inches of water vapor. Yet even the psalmist correctly recalls--many centuries later--the canopy's earlier existence (29:10).

Noah stepped out of the ark into a brand-new world--now more water than land after 40 days of rain. The sons of Noah, no longer threatened by hostile "giants," found a new threat--an increasingly-severe climatic regime, without the protecting antediluvian canopy.

Von Rad has confirmed from his exegesis of Genesis that the Flood involved the entire cosmos. 2 Peter 3:5,6 likewise pictures both the heavens and the earth having been violently re-ordered during the Flood and then verse 7 gives the most specific New Testament portrayal of the future universal destruction by fire.

Still we are given a glorious hope. God not only assures us in Gen. 9:11 and 9:15 that "there will no longer be a mabbul to wipe out the earth," but He also promises in Rev. 21:1 that even t<sup>e</sup>hon, the ever-threatening waters below, will one day be eliminated: "...and the sea was no more."

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