

Flood

In the current issue of "Tradition" - that contains several submissions by distinguished chaverim of Avodah/Aishdas, there is a troubling essay about Gan Eden and the Mabul. The essay, written by R' Shubert Spero, argues the case that these passages are allegorical in nature. There was a significant correspondence on the matter back in late 1994 (time flies when you are having fun!) on Mail-Jewish. For the benefit of those who are unaware of that correspondence, I am here posting some of the major posts. For the benefit of those who are aware of that correspondence, I have attempted to be brief and exclude as much of the correspondence as possible. The selection, however, still had to be divided over several posts. The balance is in the MJ archives: "Dirshu me'al sefer Hashem v'kir'u."

I am not sure whether to write a Letter to the Editor of Tradition or not. I would normally do so, but way back, I believe, in 1991, I wrote a Letter to the Editor of "Jewish Action" concerning R' Spero's review essay on R' Norman Lamm's "Torah U'Madda", and I am loathe to attack him again, even in the service of a cause that I feel integral and central to Yahadus.

As the Editor and Consulting Editor of Tradition are members of our little society, I bring this to their respective attentions: Perhaps the conversation that will ensue here (doubtless!) on this point will be fodder for a reappraisal in a subsequent issue of Tradition.

While the names of the participants are explicit in the MJ archives, I have nonetheless chosen to change those other than my own to those of the Shevatim, for the benefit of those who will consider the position opposed to my own as dubious to say the least, and, if they choose then not to look up the MJ archives, will be spared the knowledge of who said what when.

Although many points discussed then should probably be modified for the purposes of discussing R' Spero's essay, I leave that for a later date.

Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

Flood
(Reuven Shimon)

In response to a couple of private letters, I would like to

clarify a few things I wrote in my posting re. the flood, and I hope this will obviate the need to deal with this further, unless there is a significant need.

First, I do not deny that God could, if he wanted, have created the world 5755 years ago, created the fossils, signs of civilization etc. For that matter, he could have created the world 30 years ago and put memories into our minds and created earlier books, buildings etc. However, the best of our religious thinkers have taught us that we need not think in this fashion.

We need not adopt Tertullian's *credo quia impossibile* -- I believe because it is impossible. (Actually Tertullian really said *certum est quia impossibile est* -- It is certain because it is impossible).

It is precisely because of this that great sages interpreted the Garden of Eden story allegorically and refused to take literally *aggadot*. Judaism doesn't require us to leave our intellects at the door. E. g. Obviously it is possible for God to lift Mount Sinai over the head of the Israelites, but must we believe this literally. The whole endeavor to allegorize *aggadot* is based on the fact that God (and the world) do not behave in a completely outrageous fashion. We don't understand God, but we have an idea about how he interacts in this world, at least that's what Maimonides and his followers thought. Why else reject e. g. demons, astrology and other superstitions. Couldn't God have made the world this way? Obviously yes, but the real question is, is it likely that he did so and must we believe this. Maimonides answers no and I think modern Orthodox Jews agree, although Haredim probably do not.

In my original posting I stated that believing in the truth of the flood (and a 5000 year old world) is more extreme than denying the existence of George Washington. Someone asked me if it isn't the case that we have more evidence for George Washington than for denying the flood. The answer is obviously no. We know about Washington because of one type of evidence, historical, and we have a great deal of this. However, the entire received body of knowledge in just about every field of human study is dependant on the fact that the world is not 5000 years old and that there was not a flood. These facts are the fundamentals of biology, physics, astronomy, history, anthropology, geology, paleontology, zoology, linguistics etc. etc. Belief in a 5000 year old world and a flood which destroyed the world 4000 years ago is a denial of all human knowledge as we know it. It is a retreat into a world of belief,

rather than one based on any sort of fact, and one who believes can believe anything he want to. The fundamentalist is not able to prove that Washington lived, only to say that he believes that Washington lives. It is because Modern Orthodox do not wish to live in a world in which the entire accumulated knowledge of all civilization is to be thrown out the window that they cannot take this literally. Pay attention to what I am saying, it is impossible to make sense of anything in this world, in any field of science and many of the social sciences by adopting funadmentalist position. If people wish to live this sort of existence, fine, but one can't pretend that there is any sort of compelling reason for anyone else to. They certainly shouldn't try to put forth all sorts of pseudo-science to convince people of the correctness of their view. I think that when it comes to science, history etc. people would prefer the stated views of the great scholars (and the not so great scholars) at every university in the world. Since none of these people are fundamentalists, doesn't it make sense for the fundamentalists not even to try and touch these areas.

It is worth noting, I think, that although fundamentalism in this country has always been accompanied by anti-intellectualism, this has not been the case in the Jewish world. In fact, with the exception of some hasidic trends, anti-intellectualism has no roots in recent Jewish history. The people advocating fundamentalist positions are the most intellectual we have. People often say that they can hold the positions they do because they are ignorant of science and history. This is incorrect. It is not that they are ignorant of all these fields, it is rather that they reject them. There is a difference. The proper word to describe this is obscurantism. And I for one don't think it will last forever. One can only go against the obvious facts of our day for so long. Rabbis could declare that Copernicus's views were heretical for only so long before the weight of evidence ran over them. That will happen with fundamentalism, because if they didn't change, no one with any education will still be listening to them.

One final point which is also relevant, since every thing I have been saying touches on how one is to study the Torah. It appears to me that the traditional approach of Bible study is in many respects immature, at least in our day. What was adequate 50 years ago is now no longer so. I remember from my high school days that to study a text in more depth meant to read more commentators. That is, one increased the information intake, but the method of analysis and the forms of questions asked didn't change. When I got to college and studied the same sources again,

I was amazed at how the text could come alive, and questions and issues were dealt with that never even entered my mind in high school. I remember speaking to a number of yeshiva students and they were so excited since in yeshivah Bible was taught in such an immature, sometimes juvenile, fashion whereas Dostoevsky et al were critically analyzed by the new approaches in literature. It was only when they reached college and happened to take the course we did (offered by Zevulun Yissaschar) that they saw the depth and beauty of the Biblical stories. I realize that it is probably impossible to implement these approaches in high school but wouldn't it be great if we could apply the same rigor to the Torah (I am referring to the narratives) that we do to western literature. We need not be stuck holding onto only medieval forms of exegesis. The world of exegesis hasn't stood still, and the same insights which modern theories of literature and modern ways of reading text offer us about the great works, will assist us in understanding the Torah. I think in many respects this was Hirsch's message, that Torah, and everything about it, need not be considered shallow when compared to secular studies. This was also R. Hayyim's reason (or one of them) for his analytic method, to show that Talmud study is just as rigorous as secular study. Unfortunately, we need a new Hirsch and a new R. Hayyim since traditional Bible study in our day does not have the rigor of academic disciplines and we will not be able to attract the best minds if we do not do something about it. Either they will prefer Talmud study, which remains rigorous, or they will choose to study Western literature (or other fields), and Bible study will be left for the less skilled, who are only able to tell you about one more commentary and one more peshat, those who cannot see the forest because of the trees, that is, those who miss the big picture of the Torah.

Reuven Shimon

Mesorah (Historical Tradition) and the Flood
(Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer)

In his recent posting on the "Flood" of Noach, my friend Reuven Shimon sounds almost heroic in denying the historical veracity of our Holy Torah. He claims that this approach has sources in "Modern Orthodoxy." This alone is perhaps the most cogent argument that the "Right" could muster to brand the Modern Orthodox heretical :-). But I am sure that most Modern Orthodox would not cross the line Reuven has unfortunately crossed.

Our sources do not sustain the allegorical interpretation of the

recorded facts of Parashas Noach. To state that God, Chazal and the Rishonim were "pulling the wool over our eyes" with this blatant - according to Reuven - falsification, is to accuse God as much of caprice as to accuse Him of such were He, as Reuven described and correctly rejects, to have created the world thirty years ago with our intact memories.

I know that Reuven will counter that I may not like his approach, but so long as he does accept that this "Allegory" was given by God at Sinai he is within the traditional and normative realm of Emunah - our core belief system. Unfortunately, this is not so.

Reuven undermines the very core of our belief system - Mesorah - with his approach. Our entire religion is based on the Tradition - and the accuracy that our Fathers and Mothers have vouchsafed for it - in an unbroken chain back to Sinai. There can be much new and original exegesis of Tanach (you are all invited to my Wednesday Night Nach shiur, in which I think I engage in some), but not exegesis of the sort Reuven engages in - factual reinterpretation of Tanach that is not based on that Mesorah.

Reuven errs gravely in attributing such exegesis to RSR Hirsch. RSRH's exegesis perhaps breaks new ground in Homiletics and Philology, but he would never have broken with Chazal and the Rishonim on facts. Indeed, by definition, as Torah-true, he could not! I believe RSRH would have been horrified by the very idea that he shed a "Secular" light on our Scriptures, as Reuven claims.

I question if any of the luminaries that Reuven's brand of "Modern Orthodoxy" regards in high esteem (who are they? - with all due respect to Prof. Yissaschar, quoted by Reuven, he certainly could not be classified as a leader of Modern Orthodoxy) would have countenanced such breaches in the "Chomas HaDas", the great fortification of our religion, the accuracy of our uninterrupted historical record back to Sinai (so brilliantly described and analyzed by the Kuzari and others), which, among all the other great Truths it has imparted to us also imparts the historical record of the Flood as literal and factual.

We - whom Reuven perhaps would disparagingly dismiss as "Fundamentalists" - see no reason to raise difficulties with our accurate (and sacred) Mesorah on the basis on the latest scientific notion. Those of us who are somewhat beyond High School Textbook Science know the flux and infirmity of scientific "facts." Today it is thus, tomorrow it shall be otherwise.

It is only "Netzach Yisroel lo yishaker" - the eternal truths of the exalted Chosen People, imparted to us by Moshe Rabbeinu, Chazal and the Great Rishonim that have withstood the tests of time with the resilience of the Divine.

We have been influenced by the aggressive assertiveness of the secular world. In the service of Man's efforts to shake off the shackles of Religious Restriction, the secular world has mounted an unceasing attack on our Timeless Truths and Toras Emes. Let us all take the time to contemplate the majesty of our Great Leaders and Thinkers, and the majestic Mesorah, and the accompanying sanctity, that they have passed down to us, and grasp, assert and proudly proclaim and teach authentic Torah Judaism.

Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

Subject: Reuven Shimon and the flood
(Gad Asher)

I feel surprised to come to the defense of Reuven Shimon. None the less, it is not clear to me that his position in the matter of the allegorization of the flood is so clearly beyond the pale. Surely you agree that the first perek of Breishis is not to be taken literally. Once we accept that, it becomes harder to draw the line at the non-literal interpretation of any non-Halachic portions of the Torah. What do you think Chazal meant, for example, in the equation of the nachash and the yetzer hora? ,Did the author of that maimra mean to preserve both the pshat and the drash or to assert that the drash in this case is the pshat? I would assert that one finds both positions among the rishonim; this is especially the case among such Sepharadim as the Akedas Yitzchok.

Similarly the Rambam's assertion that the 3 angels came only in a vision, despite the simple meaning of the psukim, would be consistent with the position that Reuven is taking. In sum, it seems to me that there is enough evidence to let Reuven maintain that his view is consistent with that of respectable predecessors albeit a minority.

Personally I prefer to take the position that the Torah is clearly not a source of scientific knowledge but of moral instruction. I am prepared to take everyt hing literally unless compelled to do otherwise (as is clearly the case in the first perek) but if so compelled I would have no difficulty as long as Halachic interpretation was unaffected. After all, Hashem could

have created us through evolution if he so chose and I have no idea of what process he actually used.

I think evolutionary theory as I understand it is full of holes but I could accept it if there were no alternative.

Reuven's references to the non-literal interpretation of aggados are of course irrelevant since those discussions do not deal with Torah Shebiksav but his case can still be made.

I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts. I'm writing to you privately because I don't want to appear to be lending support to the borderline kfira that often is posted on the list. I have a problem with your suggestion that the Rishonim can tell us what can be seen as allegory; why not say that they had no right to go beyond Chazal? It would seem that you would have to say (as you do) that the allegorization of a pasuk is not strictly prohibited (presumably if it is not Halachic - otherwise gilui panim baTorah shelo kaHalacha). If not prohibited, why not Acharonim - couldn't the Gra, the Ari or the Rama suggest allegorization? How about R' Chaim Ozer? I prefer to maintain (and I think it's implied in your use of the slippery slope reference) that the further an idea deviates from the mekubal the more essential it is that the wisdom of gedolei Torah be applied to the question of entertaining it.

I remain troubled by the idea, however, that there is no prohibition against the allegorization of Torah. It is clear to me (I think) that any suggestion of non-literality from Lech Lecha on (that is, from the beginning of the explicit sacred history of klal Yisroel) is asur.

Were Reuven to suggest that Avraham Avinu never existed it seems to me that he would be a kofer, at least in the category of "makchish magideha". Were he to suggest that Maaseh Breishis is non-literal he would be following in the steps of Chazal (a la your position, though I would deny that right to the Rishonim). I am unsure about the intervening prokim. Chazal clearly had some members who saw the story of the nachash non-literally but the mabul is more of a puzzle.

I suppose that we basically agree except for my inclination to draw the line at Chazal rather than the Rishonim. The problem with the Rambam is not in the question of how malachim are seen but how you reconcile the concreteness of the psukim with his position. The Ramban, after all, doesn't question the possibility of the Rambam's case but its truth based on the text.

Gad Asher

My Responses to Gad Asher
(Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer)

Me:

I have a problem with your suggestion that the Rishonim can tell us what can be seen as allegory; why not say that they had no right to go beyond Chazal? It would seem that you, would have to say (as you do) that the allegorization of a pasuk is not strictly prohibited (presumably if it is not Halachic - otherwise gilui panim baTorah shelo kaHalacha).

I only include the Rishonim because we know that certain Rishonim - especially Rabbeinu Chananel and his Beis Medrash - are known to have their own Kabbalos which are not necessarily recorded in Chazal. Even Rashi will occasionally cite a Medrash that we do not possess, which may qualify as well. Other than those who can thus claim that they possessed a Mesorah, I too reject any Chiddush in "Allegory" beyond Chazal regardless of the stature of the individual in question.

Gad Asher:

I prefer to maintain (and I think it's implied in your use of the slippery slope reference) that the further an idea deviates from the mekubal the more essential it is that the wisdom of gedolei Torah be applied to the question of entertaining it.

Me:

Ah, but whom do you mean by Gedolei Torah? Shades of the old "Who is a Gadol question" - who is qualified to provide this kind of guidance?

Gad Asher:

Were Reuven to suggest that Avraham Avinu never existed it ,seems to me that he he would be a kofer, at least in the ,category of "makchish magideha". Were he to suggest that, Maaseh Breishis is non-literal he would be following in the steps of Chazal (a la your position, though I would deny that right to the Rishonim). I am unsure about the, intervening prokim.

Chazal clearly had some members who saw ,the story of the nachash non-literally but the mabul is more of a puzzle.

Me:

What sources in Chazal make you unsure about the Mabul? I don't know of any.

I suppose that we basically agree except for my inclination to draw the line at Chazal rather than the Rishonim. The problem with the Rambam is not in the question of how malachim are seen but how you reconcile the concreteness of the psukim with his position. The Ramban, after all, doesn't question the possibility of the Rambam's case but its truth based on the text.

The Rambam is not alone. The Ralbag, and occasionally the Radak on Nach make the argument of visions consistently when confronted with Angelic encounters, etc. - even if the Pasuk seems quite concrete.

Clearly they hold tha visions are concrete things too - after all, Nevuah is one of the Ikkarim.

Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

Criticism of Reuven Shimon's submission on the Flood
(Levi Yehuda)

Whether one agrees with Reuven Shimon's non-literal interpretation of the Flood or not, anyone familiar with the broad outlines of traditional Jewish exegesis and thought must admit that the right to such an interpretation is absolutely within the parameters of our tradition. There have been numerous interpretations expounded by Talmudic and Midrashic sages and our great commentators that ran counter to what at least superficially appears to have been the previously widely-accepted opinion.

Reuven's example of another case of Rishonim allegorizing was the Garden of Eden. Several additional examples will be helpful. The Rambam, primarily because of his interpretation of prophecy as occurring in a vision, allegorizes each of the following: G-d taking Abraham outside and showing him the stars; the whole passage of Abraham's three visitors; Jacob's wrestling with the angel; the whole episode of Balaam's talking ass; Hosea's taking a harlot wife; Ezekiel's resurrection of the dead (a Talmudic controversy); Gideon's fleece of wool; and many other Scriptural events (Guide 2: 42, 47). R. Yosef Ibn Caspi and others allow allegorization of the great fish swallowing Yonah. Many Rishonim felt science indicated that necromancy doesn't exist and rejected

a literal interpretation of the necromancer's conjuring up of the deceased prophet Samuel and his ensuing conversation with King Saul.

If there would have been a compelling scientific or philosophic reason to support the Eternity of the Universe view, the Rambam states he would have interpreted Genesis 1 in accordance with it, but he believes Aristotle didn't truly make his point, so Mesorah came into play. In our century R. Kook considered the doctrine of evolution - modified to include the Creator's role - so compelling and uplifting that he urged Torah only be taught that way.

The "Mesorah", which some have thrown against Reuven, important as it is, should not be glamorized into something it isn't. The Talmudic sages and the Rishonim recognized that there are many, many matters in Scripture that "Mesorah" even in their days did not clarify and everybody had to do their best with whatever they could garner from tradition, logic and available evidence. The sages and commentaries are constantly arguing with each other about how to understand thousands of matters of realia, events and meaning of words, often having diametrically opposed views, trying to reach truth. We should continue the process and use the great tools of science, archaeology, philology, history, etc. that are at our disposal today.

Let us not get bogged down with a misinterpretation of "Elu VeElu - these and these are the words of the living G-d", and feel untraditional every time we come up with an interpretation contrary to the view of a Talmudic sage or a Rishon. Great as the sages were, they were fallible and welcomed every opportunity to clarify a matter. The misinterpretation of "Elu Veelu" and the recently-developed concept of "Daas Torah" are stifling legitimate Torah research and moving Orthodox Judaism into an unenlightened age contrary to our glorious heritage.

Yosef Bechhofer commits a personal injustice to Reuven by accusing him of stating that "G-d, Chazal and the Rishonim were "pulling the wool over our eyes" with this blatant falsification" [of an allegorical flood account], something Reuven never even implied. Some readers may have received the impression from Yosef's use of quotation marks around "pulling the wool over our eyes" that those were Reuven's words. Although the marks indicate a colloquial phrase, the sentence demonstrates that Yosef completely misunderstands Reuven. Reuven, as great luminaries of our tradition through the centuries, doesn't think of an allegory as deceptive. We may say that on the contrary, Reuven is

combatting the view of those who posit literalness in the face of overwhelming evidence, who sometimes are led to say the evidence was put there by the Creator to fool us.

In conclusion we should recognize that a prophetic allegory is as true and inspiring as any "actual" history.

Levi Yehuda

My Responses
(Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer)

From Levi Yehuda:

There have been numerous interpretations expounded by Talmudic and Midrashic sages and our great commentators that ran counter to what at least superficially appears to have been the previously widely-accepted opinion.

Me:

That is of course true, but they are "Talmudic and Midrashic sages and our great commentators," and we are not. Yes, we are smaller less knowledgeable and privy to less Ruach HaKodesh than Chazal and the Great Rishonim, such as Rabbeinu Chananel, whom other Rishonim testify had direct access to the Mesorah "shekol devarav divrei kabbala" - "that all of his words were from the Tradition." That doesn't mean we can't be creative - we just must know our limitations.

Several additional examples will be helpful. The Rambam, primarily because of his interpretation of prophecy as occurring in a vision, allegorizes each of the following: G-d taking Abraham outside and showing him the stars; the whole passage of Abraham's three visitors; Jacob's wrestling with the angel; the whole episode of Balaam's talking ass; Hosea's taking a harlot wife; Ezekiel's resurrection of the dead (a Talmudic controversy); Gideon's fleece of wool; and many other Scriptural events (Guide 2: 42, 47).

I just taught Gideon's fleece of wool in my Nach class. With all due respect to you and others who commented to me privately about the Rambam, Rabbag and others' approach towards such events that they say were visions or conveyed by prophets - **THAT IS NOT THE SAME AS ALLEGORY**. The Rambam, who codified the reality of prophecy as one of the 13 Principles believes that this is the way angels appear and signs occur - in visions. The Tanach accurately describes real events that actually transpired - in

the realm of prophecy. What I understood Reuven to have said is that the Flood account is an allegory - i.e., it didn't take place in the realm of vision either - it is, according to Reuven, a symbolic story, much like a parable. Perhaps your closing statement: "In conclusion we should recognize that a prophetic allegory is as true and inspiring as any "actual" history" agrees with me? (BTW, I would find the interpretation of the Flood as a vision unacceptable. Miracles do occur - no one says, or can say, that the Splitting of the Sea or the Giving of the Torah was a vision, and the Flood I place in the same category. But that is a separate issue.)

Levi Yehuda:

R. Yosef Ibn Caspi and others allow allegorization of the great fish swallowing Yonah.

Me:

Rabbi Ibn Caspi was a controversial source. I reserve the right to reject his interpretation as beyond the mainstream.

Levi Yehuda:

Many Rishonim felt science indicated that necromancy doesn't exist and rejected a literal interpretation of the necromancer's conjuring up of the deceased prophet Samuel and his ensuing conversation with King Saul.

Me:

Again, not as allegory but as visions.

Levi Yehuda:

If there would have been a compelling scientific or philosophic reason to support the Eternity of the Universe view, the Rambam states he would have interpreted Genesis 1 in accordance with it, but he believes Aristotle didn't truly make his point, so Mesorah came into play. In our century R. Kook considered the doctrine of evolution - modified to include the Creator's role - so compelling and uplifting that he urged Torah only be taught that way.

Me:

I fail to see why these points are relevant. Of course we can accept science where it does not contradict Torah. it is where there is a REAL clash that our debate begins.

Levi Yehuda:

The "Mesorah", which some have thrown against Reuven, important as it is, should not be glamorized into something it isn't. The

Talmudic sages and the Rishonim recognized that there are many, many matters in Scripture that "Mesorah" even in their days did not clarify and everybody had to do their best with whatever they could garner from tradition, logic and available evidence.

Me:

This is true, but it does not justify your next statement, in which you leap to equate us with our "tools" with Chazal.

Levi Yehuda:

The misinterpretation of "Elu Veelu" and the recently-developed concept of "Daas Torah" are stifling legitimate Torah research and moving Orthodox Judaism into an unenlightened age contrary to our glorious heritage.

Me:

You realize that I didn't quote either of these concepts in my posting. I don't think they have anything to do with this discussion, and I fear you bring them in to "pigeonhole" me as a rabid right winger who can be dismissed out of hand. We can do great research, and I hope that I do, and use all the tools at our disposal. We are not discussing dispute with our contemporaries, however, which would bring "Elu Veelu" and "the recently-developed concept" of "Daas Torah" (as an aside, see Rabbi Wein's article in the November "Jewish Observer" - "Da'as Torah" is a new phrase, but not a new concept) - but our attitude towards Mesorah and Chazal. I resubmit, one cannot reinterpret as allegory that which Chazal - via the Mesorah - accepted as fact.

Indeed, once you question the Mabul as fact, pray tell, what leads you to believe that Mattan Torah and Yetzias Mitzrayim are fact?

Levi Yehuda:

Yosef Bechhofer commits a personal injustice to Reuven by accusing him of stating that "G-d, Chazal and the Rishonim were "pulling the wool over our eyes" with this blatant falsification" [of an allegorical flood account], something Reuven never even implied.

Me:

I certainly didn't mean to insult Reuven. I generally agree with much of what Reuven has to say and respect his scholarship. I hope we can continue to discuss these matters unemotionally and in a friendly fashion!

Levi Yehuda:

We may say that on the contrary, Reuven is combatting the view of those who posit literalness in the face of overwhelming evidence, who sometimes are led to say the evidence was put there by the Creator to fool us.

Me:

I am not a member of the "planted evidence" school of thought. I, however, fail to understand the negativism against literalism where our Mesorah dictates it, in Torah she'bi'Ksav. I do not place science on a pedestal - it is certainly as fallible, IMHO, much more, than the traditions of our Jewish Heritage and History.

Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

Reuven Shimon and the flood
(Gad Asher)

Offhand the only source I can recall as suggesting a less-than-fully- literal approach to the story of the mabul is the Gemara in Z'vachim 113 where there is a machlokes as to whether the mabul was universal (as would appear from the psukim) or partial (not affecting Eretz Yisrael). I have wondered about this for years - once we allow that the mabul was not universal many problems follow. What was actually excluded? Why would such an extraordinary miracle (the world is swamped with megatons of water and they stop at the borders of EY) not be mentioned? What happened to the flora and fauna of EY? etc.

Your comment about "which g'dolim" is of course correct but my answer would be "whomever you consider a gadol to whom you would address questions concerning kares, misa, etc." I only meant to say that even though I come from a Bais Medrash that emphasized individual thought and the right to think for oneself common sense dictates that even if one does not violate a Halachic proscription one can not cavalierly deviate from that which has been held dear and true by generations of shomrei Torah umitzvos. In cases where one feels compelled to sanction such deviation one should at least ascertain that substantial torah scholars raise no serious objections. Chidush is not asur in machshava but neither does anything go.

Gad Asher

The Flood and Mesorah
(Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer)

Levi Yehuda raised the issue of the Rambam's view of Aristotle's theory that the matter of this world always existed. He states, according to Rabbi Yehuda, that:

If there would have been a compelling scientific or philosophic reason to support the Eternity of the Universe view, the Rambam states he would have interpreted Genesis 1 in accordance with it, but he believes Aristotle didn't truly make his point, so Mesorah came into play.

In a later posting, he expanded on this point further.

Let us examine the actual Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim II:25 (p. 328 in the Pines edition, which I quote):

"If, however, one believed in eternity... - which is the opinion of Plato - ...this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law... . It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in accordance with this opinion. And many obscure passages could be found in the texts of the Torah and others with which this opinion could be connected... . However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated..."

In fact, this section - paraphrased by Rabbi Yehuda - is in regard to PLATO's opinion. In regard to Aristotle's opinion, the Rambam writes in the previous section:

"...The belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it - that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity,... and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything - destroys the Law in its principle, NECESSARILY GIVES THE LIE TO EVERY MIRACLE, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless - BY G-D! - ONE INTERPRETS THE MIRACLES FIGURATIVELY ALSO, as was done by the Islamic internalists; this, however would result in some sort of crazy imaginings."

(The emphasis is, of course, mine.) The text, I believe, speaks for itself. I only note that this idea is briefly and clearly discussed by Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg in "Fundamentals and Faith" pp. 50-52.

Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

The Flood, Mesorah..., and now, Gan Eden
Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

Until now, Levi Yehuda correctly noted, I have dealt only with the Flood, and not with Gan Eden. I wanted to look that up a little before commenting. I did.

I certainly do not claim to have done exhaustive research, but I have done what I believe to be enough to state that viewing the Gan Eden account as allegory is not in line with the dominant mainstream view of Chazal and the Rishonim. The one opinion I found that holds expressly that the story with the serpent is an allegory is the Sforno on the episode with the serpent and the "Efodi" Commentary on the Moreh Nevuchim (Ibn Tibbon edition, II:30, pp. 51-52).

In my opinion, this is clearly not the Rambam himself's position, and I invite readers to peruse the Moreh themselves, p. 356 in the Pines English translation).

I grant that the Abarbanel mentions that the Rambam himself holds the episode allegorical, but he clearly was influenced by the Rambam's commentators, whom he calls the Rambam's "friends."

The Abarbanel himself, however, is critical of the Rambam (according to his understanding of him). The Abarbanel, in fact, uses reasoning that should be familiar to readers of my previous postings: It is incorrect to take texts that the Torah conveys as actual factual description and interpret them allegorically! He does give some novel interpretations of the events in Gan Eden, but all true to a factual perspective.

I also perused all the Chazals brought by Rabbi Kasher in the Torah Sheleima (readers not familiar with that work should understand that it is an exhaustive, comprehensive and encyclopediac compilation of all Chazals and most Rishonim and many Acharonim on Torah she'bi'ktav). I could not find any Chazal that takes the account of Gan Eden as allegorical.

Those that equate the serpent with the evil inclination need not dismiss its actual existence, but rather see it as "evil incarnate" (see the Nefesh HaChaim 1:6 in the note there).

Indeed, the Ramban in his commentary 3:22 and in the "Torat HaAdam" (Kisvei Ramban vol. 2 p. 295 in the Mossad HaRav Kook

edition) takes great pains to stress that Gan Eden and all the events that occurred therein actually existed in this world, and that references to a spiritual Gan Eden in Chazal, refer to a parallel spiritual realm that also really exists, and that the events that transpired in Gan Eden below also transpired in that Gan Eden on high.

Again, I only checked Rishonim at my ready disposal, but these seem pretty clear. Rabbenu Bechayei takes the view of the Ramban, of course.

The Ibn Ezra as well is adamantly opposed to allegorical interpretation (See Nechama Leibowitz's "Iyunim" p. 14 as well). So is R. Sa'adia Gaon.

I admit that I did not see Reuven Shimon's original posting on Gan Eden, but so far the Sforunu is all I found. Bear in mind: a) that he too takes the rest of the Gan Eden account as literal; b) that he was not adverse to the surreal (see his link of "Tumah" and demons in his "Kavanos HaTorah"); c) the Sforunu himself weaves in and out of the allegory in 3:14.

Nevertheless, the Sforunu exists. However, in light of Chazal and the other Rishonim, his interpretation here must be rejected.

Yet, be that as it may, the Sforunu only makes this jump here where he can cite verses from Nach (and Chazal) in which the term "Nachash" is used as an express allegory for the Evil Inclination and the Power of Fantasy. The Sforunu certainly did not take the Flood as allegorical - there is no basis for that, even according to the Sforunu's non-mainstream approach here.

Aggada
(Dan Naftali)

While I find the openness of the forum, and the intellectual acuity of many of its participants exhilarating, sometimes the diversity of opinion gets oppressive.

I wonder how people who, after all, share a profound commitment to halacha and the thirteen principles of the Rambam, can still disagree so passionately on basic issues.

These last few weeks on mail-jewish make a traditionalist feel as comfortable as Benjamin Hooks at a Klan reunion. We've seen the Mabul [Flood] dry up, midrash reduced to fairy tales, Esav and

Yaakov reverse roles, and Daas Torah uncovered as the invention of 19th century spin-doctors. I'd bet that I am not the only one who feels frustrated for not having time to respond to all these important points. More important, though, than the consternation of those of us with unshakeable belief, must be the confusion of those who did not have the zechus [merit] to spend years in a bais medrash to be able to firmly formulate their beliefs. They don't know whom to believe, and in some cases that there is even another viewpoint that should be considered.

In this vein I offer the perceptions of one unabashed traditionalist concerning the Aggada, at least in outline form. I believe that I present nothing new, but that they are all based on the major thrust of our literature and our mesorah of previous centuries. I do not offer them as a doctrinal statement, but as one traditional view, for those who wish to learn about such views, that I received from my rabbeim, and continue to teach my students.

- 1) All of Torah was authored by Hashem, including the narrative portions.
- 2) Hashem had a purpose in writing every letter of the Torah.
- 3) Not all interpretations of Torah are created equal. One who argues that the "pri etz hadar" we are to take on the first of Sukkos is a papaya, is mistaken, even if most Hawaiians will agree that its a nicer fruit than an esrog. One who maintains that the three evocations of a Divine Name in the first line of the Shma allude (chas v'shalom) to the Trinity has no place in Jewish society.
- 4) To find the true intentions of the Author in what might otherwise be an infinite number of good, bad, and ugly ways of interpreting the text, we turn to the Oral Torah. This is what He instructed us. This reliance on traditional interpretation is a more important way that we differ with Protestantism than in the nature of Jesus.
- 5) Torah She-b'al Peh [the Oral Law] did not skip the narrative portions of Chumash. While we do not always come to binding conclusions about Aggadic material (as we do in halacha), we really attempt to discover within Aggada what we do in Halacha. We try to discover what lessons Hashem wishes us to learn. He wrote the Torah in a way that multiple truths may be wringed out of a given text. But not all that may be squeezed out of a text is Truth.

6) Midrashim are the earliest, and therefore most authoritative way of discovering the approach Chazal took to a topic in Chumash.

7) Midrashim can be more profound than halachic portions of the Talmud. For this reason, they were not committed to writing (Gemara Gittin) when much of the rest of the Oral Torah was. There was greater reluctance here that the true meaning would be lost or perverted (MaHaRaTZ Chayes). Sometimes, Chazal deliberately couched their profundity in obscure or even bizarre language, so that those without the proper readiness and orientation would cast it aside, and not gain access to its secrets (Ramchal). Those who understand the genius of the Sages of the Talmud will understand that those same contributors are incapable of spewing nonsense, and thus will try harder to uncover their real intention (Rambam).

8) Not all midrashim come from the same source. Some are entirely traditional. They contain information whose source was direct revelation at Sinai. This is particularly likely in the case of statements that reflect basic principles of faith (Maharatz Chayes). Other midrashim are not traditional in this sense. They express the opinion of the individual author. (Avraham ben HaRambam). Even here, though, these opinions are not shots in the dark. They incorporate a) elements of general approach that are entirely traditional (e.g. Just how "good" were the Avos? How trustworthy is prophecy? Were the heroes of Nach bloodthirsty warriors, or G-d fearing, intense souls?). They also include b) the honing of mental skills by years of incomprehensible depth of Torah understanding.

9) Not all midrashim were meant to be taken literally. But they are always correct. (Maharal of Prague, one of our greatest "bulldogs" for the sanctity of every letter of Chazal, is nonetheless notoriously non-literal in his approach to countless passages.) We often do not know which should, and which should not. We should apply the same tools to them as we do in studying the halachic parts of the gemara. None of us within Orthodoxy would think seriously of opening a Shas and deliberately ignoring Rashi in favor of our own understanding. We should treat the Aggada the same way. We should allow greater minds than ours to guide us to our conclusions. If we can't find that guidance, then at least we should understand that any difficulty lies with our comprehension, not with the product they served up.

10) Because the "real" intent of the author of a passage in the

Aggada is often elusive, we cannot as often fix a legally binding meaning to many passages. In particular, if a passage seems to convey something to us that completely violates our sensibilities, it is likely that we have missed its real thrust, and therefore do not learn from it. This is the meaning of "Eyn lemaydin min ha- aggados" [We do not learn from Aggados] (Michtav Me-eliyahu). Nonetheless, there are many, many examples of practical laws that have been codified, whose only source is the Aggada. This is particularly likely when the source is an aggada that was incorporated by the editors of the Gemara. (Maharatz Chayes)

11) Chazal often used the scientific knowledge common in their times as vehicles for expressing their wisdom. Science may change. The task of Chazal was to know and disseminate the timeless Torah that was revealed at Sinai, not the science that is revealed with the passage of time. The task of the student is to get beyond the scientific assumptions, and to the core of the teaching they wish to convey. These teachings transcend time and any particular cultural form of expression. (Maharal, many places; Michtav Me- Eliyahu vol. 4)

12) Can we sometimes arrive at truths about the Torah without their guidance? Sure. Patients can self-prescribe too, and sometimes live to talk about it. Good medicine it isn't.

There. I feel better just writing all of this!

(Dan Naftali)