

Exegetical Brief: Genesis 7—The Flood Prevailed

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Preparing a recent Bible study on the great flood required reviewing the verbs the Genesis account uses to describe the action of the floodwaters.

Moses twice tells us that, during the initial forty days of the flood, the waters **וַיִּרְבּוּ** on the earth (Gn 7:17,18). The verb root is **רבה** (literally "to be/become great"). NIV translates: "the waters increased."

Four times, however, Moses chooses the verb **גבר**. In 7:18 and 20 the NIV translates **וַיִּגְבְּרוּ** "the waters rose;" in 7:19 "they rose greatly" (**וַיִּגְבְּרוּ מְאֹד מְאֹד**); in 7:24 "flooded" (**וַיִּגְבְּרוּ**).

The NIV translations seem pale when compared to the Hebrew. The root meaning of **גבר** is "to be strong/mighty." It is the root of the noun **גבור** ("a mighty man," "a champion"). Many Bible readers have the impression that after rising to maximum height during the first forty days, the floodwaters for the next 110 days simply remained sluggishly and sullenly at flood stage.

The fourfold use of **גבר** suggests there was more to it than that. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* makes this interesting comment about the verb **גבר**: "The Hebrew root is commonly associated with warfare." This gives us the picture of a massive layer of water, miles high, on the warpath, on a rampage. This mighty volume of water, twenty-two feet higher than the highest mountain and carrying trees and rocks and debris with it, raved and raged and tore away at the earth for almost half a year. If 7:11 refers to an earthquake occurring on the ocean floor, then tidal waves (10' to 60' above tide level) could have been part of the action described by **וַיִּגְבְּרוּ**.

The fourfold use of a term usually associated with warfare underscores the fearful results of God's judgment. It serves as a reminder that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Significant, too, is the fact that it was Yahweh, the faithful God of the covenant, who announced, "I will wipe mankind... from the face of the earth" (Gn 6:7). It is the Savior who will not permit anyone to wipe his feet on the divine offer of grace.

But Moses' word choice also magnifies the miracle of deliverance that the covenant God performed during the flood. The ark, together with its precious cargo, remained unharmed while everything else was being dismantled and destroyed. The miracle of deliverance from the flood is every bit as awesome as the miracle of destruction by the flood. Yahweh means business with his gracious promise, just as he does with his threat of judgment.