

The Days of the Flood

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One of the most well known Bible stories is the story of Noah and the Flood; it has served as the basis for countless derivative stories and songs. Most people who have had any exposure to religious education, know that “the animals they came by twosies, twosies” and that “it rained and rained for forty daysies, daysies.” They may also know why the Flood was sent, the story of the dove going forth, and they may even remember God’s promise, sealed with the rainbow. The story, of course, is more than an expression of how evil can be destroyed and the majesty of God’s power. In a careful reading of the text, there are two significant measures. First, the measure of space, as God provides Noah with the building instructions, cubit by cubit. The second is the measure of time, not just the forty days of rain, but all of the time from the start of the deluge to its end. In this accounting, however, there are two measures of time: one measure counts the number of days that each stage of the flood lasted, while the other measures these in terms of the dates on the calendar. The two measures, however, do not produce the same results. One possible explanation for this difference is that the story is another example of the merging of two traditions, without any attempt to reconcile them. This same lack of reconciliation occurs in other places in the Torah, as in the two different accounts of creation or in the story of Joseph’s being sold into slavery. It is also possible that one measure was a part of an older tradition/edition, and the other measure was added during an editing process. Since it would be difficult to attempt to reconcile these two accountings, it may be more fruitful to simply examine each of them to see how they differ.

There is no ambiguity about the length of the flood; the text is quite clear that Noah was 600 when the flood began and 601 when it ended. Within this span, there is

ample latitude for the exact duration. In doing the counting, an assumption must be made about the calendar being used. While there is later Rabbinic commentary on the calendar, the only indication in the text is the mention of specific months. Based on the use of the lunar calendar throughout the remainder of the Biblical text, it is not unreasonable to base the counting on a lunar calendar. Using the lunar calendar as a base, the question then becomes whether the first month is Nissan or Tishrei. Since the counting of the months is later in the text, and the story is related to a “second creation,” it is reasonable to follow the idea that the world was created on the first of Tishrei, and a calendar that counts the first month as Tishrei should be used. Further support for starting with Tishrei is the time when rains come in Israel. Since the flood begins on the seventeenth day of the second month (Genesis 7:11), the rainy season should have begun. This conclusion is based on the inclusion for the prayer for rain in the daily services, beginning after Sukkot which occurs in the month of Tishrei. In a well ordered world, it would be unreasonable to have even abnormal rain occur during the time of year when rain is a rarity.

In order to match the two accounts, it is easiest to separate the two of them. The case for using the months specified computes only because the days mentioned are ignored. If the start of the flood is “in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month” (Genesis 7:11), then the forty days ends on the twenty-seventh day of the third month. The next time span of 150 days then concludes, according to the text, on the last day of the eighth month. The month reference appears after the days, and the text then has the ark resting on the mountain “in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month.” (Genesis 8:4) Since the waters are now diminishing, this would fall into the second 150 day period. At this point, the text provides a marker for counting the

concluding 40 day period, “In the tenth month, on the first of the month...” (Genesis 8:5). The next date mentioned is the conclusion of the flood which is “in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month.” (Genesis 8:14) Since there are 145 days (Tammuz: 29 + Av: 30 + Elul: 29 + Tishrei: 30 + Heshvan: 27) between the first of the tenth month and the twenty-seventh of the second month, the marker dates cannot reflect the days specified, since only an additional 61 days at most are described when the days are counted. While the relationship of days to the months may be an accurate reflection of what was intended, the use of the months as the event markers must be completely separate from the counting of all the days in order for there to be true coherence to the account.

The sages used this technique in their explication in Midrash Rabbah, Genesis XXXIII: 7:

AND HE SENT FORTH THE DOVE, AND SHE RETURNED NOT AGAIN TO HIM ANY MORE, AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE SIX HUNDRED AND FIRST YEAR, IN THE FIRST MONTH, THE FIRST DAY OF THE MONTH. We learned: The judgment of the generation of the Flood lasted twelve months. How is this deduced? In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month... the windows of heaven were opened (Gen. VII, 11); and it is written, And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights this embraces the rest of Marheshwan and Kislew; And the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days this covers Tebeth, Shebat, Adar, Nisan, and Iyar; And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day, upon the mountains of Ararat that means Siwan, the seventh month from the descent of the rain. For sixteen days the water diminished at the rate of a cubit per four days, which is one and a half handbreadths per day. You may thus infer that the Ark was eleven cubits in the water, and it all drained off in sixty days. Thus you read, And the waters decreased continually until the tenth months that is Ab, the tenth from the descent of the rain. Another interpretation: And it came to pass in the six hundred and first year, in the first month [i.e. Tishri], on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth.

In order to make their accounting work, the sages needed to read the seventh month not as the seventh month of the year, but rather as the seventh month since the start of the

flood. To be consistent, and to make the reconciliation possible, they also counted the tenth month in the same manner. Rashi counted both forward and backwards to attempt to make the days match the stated events; so that the tenth month is also Av, but the seventh month is not Nisan but rather Sivan.¹ Without basing the counting of the months on the events within the story, even the only way both the sages and other commentators could reconcile the calculation of the period of the flood was to base their computations on events in the text rather than on the order of the calendar.

Using the specified beginning and end, and counting the days listed provides a different picture. The text states: “And on the seventh day the waters of the Flood came upon the earth.” (Genesis 7:10) This day is then qualified to be “in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month...” (Genesis 7:11). The conclusion of the flood is recorded as “And in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was fully dried.” (Genesis 8:14). So, whatever counting is to be done should reasonably fit within these two dates. Having established the starting point, the text then counts the next 40 days: “The Flood continued forty days on the earth,” (Genesis 7:17), followed by “And when the waters had swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days,” (Genesis 7:24), making the count at this point 190 days.

The next 190 days are counted in the text: “and the waters diminished at the end of one hundred and fifty days.” (Genesis 8:3). Followed by, “And it came to pass at the end of the forty days...” (Genesis 8:6). There is an implication in the text that there is additional seven days between the sending out of the raven, and the first flight of the dove. This is inferred from “He waited another seven days” (Genesis 8:10), followed by “he waited again another seven days” (Genesis 8:12). These verses account for at least

¹Commentary on the Torah, Ben Yitzchak, Shlomo, Rashi, Vol. I, pp. 82-83

another 14, if not 21 days. Since it is not specified, it is possible to conclude that the first seven days are a part of the last 40 cited, thus making the days to be counted a total of 394. Based on a solar calendar this would represent 13 months, as it would based on a lunar calendar; however, in the Jewish calendar, a leap year has 13 months. If the year of the flood was, indeed, a leap year then the counting of days becomes a valid way to determine the actual length of the flood.

In tabular form, based on Tishrei as the first month, this account is represented as:

Month		# of days in the month	Event Start	Days Counted	Event End	Event Total
Heshvan	2	29	17th	13		
Kislev	3	30		27	27 th	40
			28 th	3		
Tevet	4	29		29		
Shevat	5	30		30		
Adar Aleph	6a	29		30		
Adar Bet	6b	30		29		
Nissan	7	30		29	29 th	150
			30 th	1		
Iyar	8	29		29		
Sivan	9	29		30		
Tammuz	10	30		29		
Av	11	30		30		
Elul	12	29		29		150
Tishrei	1	30		2	2 nd	
			3 rd	28		
Heshvan	2	29		12	12 th	40
			13 th	14	27 th	14
						394

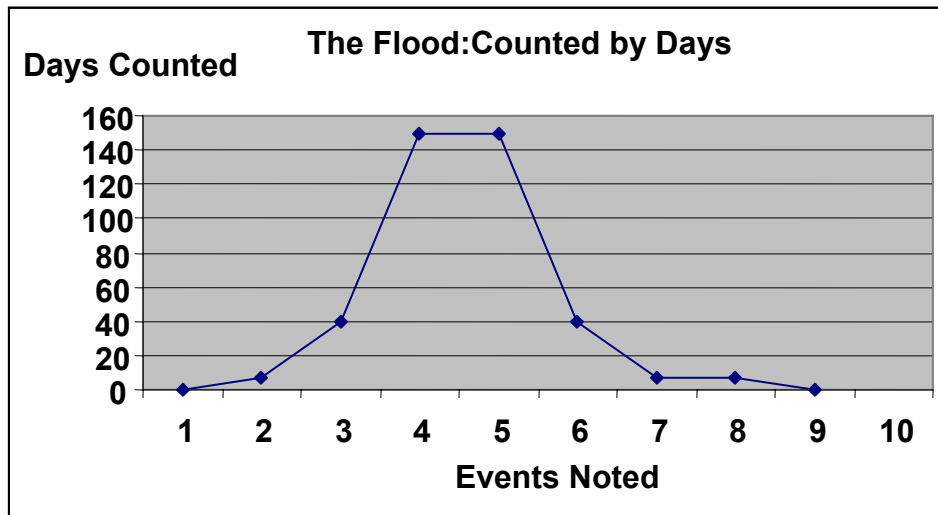
Showing the same plotting with Nissan as the first month would not make any significant difference even allowing for the change of the defective (29 day) months that comes with a leap year. In tabular form, based on Nissan as the first month, this is represented as:

Month		# of days in the month	Event Start	Days Counted	Event End	Event Total
Iyyar	2	29	17 th	7	23 rd ^h	7
			24 th	6		
Sivan	3	30		30		
Tammuz	4	29		4	4 th	40
			5 th	25		
Av	5	30		30		
Elul	6	29		29		
Tishri	7	30		30		
Heshvan	8	29		29		
				7	7 th	150
Kislev	9	30	8 th	23		
Tevet	10	29		29		
Shevat	11	30		30		
Adar Aleph	12a	30		30		
Adar Bet	12b	29		29		
Nissan	1	30		9	9 th	150
			10 th	21		
Iyyar	2	29		19	19 th	40
			20 th	7	27 th	7
						394

As indicated, the problem with using Nissan as the starting point is that it does not coincide with the rainy season, nor is there any evidence that counting months from Nissan would be appropriate at this point in the text.

This still leaves certain inconsistencies in the text when it specifies the dates for the landing on the mountain and the date the mountain tops become visible. Even if the assumption is made that this is a part of the 150 days that the water diminished, the dates still do not work. The choice is then to use either the starting and ending points, and to count the days specified, or to accept the calendar dates provided and be left with the puzzle of their not computing accurately. However, by looking at another graphic

representation of the days, a conclusion can be possible. The following chart reflects the days specified, but does not assume a beginning or ending point on the calendar. What is revealing about the chart is its symmetry:



The graph does include the 7 days that the ark was ready before the flood actually began (Genesis 7:10) and as well as the fourteen days needed to confirm that the flood had truly ended. In mathematical terms, this represents an almost perfect bell curve, i.e. a bow. The additional 7 days at the end are, perhaps, a reminder, for as Noah discovered, it does take longer to make sure the ground is secure than it does to become engulfed in a flood. While this presentation presents an interesting closure, it does not provide an infallible answer, nor does it resolve the inherent contradictions between the days defined and the dates provided. The fact that the result forms an arc does provide a link to the rainbow provided later in the story as a sign.

It is, of course, speculative to determine how the text was actually put together, but there is general agreement that the overall story is the product of the Jahwist (J) tradition. The hand of the Priest (P), however, is apparent both in the inclusion of the “Of every clean animal take unto you seven pairs” (Genesis 7:2), as well as in the inclusion of

the sacrifice Noah brings. In addition, the sequence of events is well-order, and specified by days, just as the sacrifices in latter sections are well ordered and specified by days, e.g. Numbers 29. It is important to note that the story would read as well without the inclusion of the specific months. If every occurrence of this text were eliminated, the story would still read coherently and logically. On this basis, it would seem that these are a later addition. If these phrases are an addition, it could be asked why an editor felt that these were necessary. The most obvious answer is in the text itself. As indicated, the span of months accompanies the rainy season, and the text is quite specific that the flood began when Noah was 600 and ended when he was 601, so it is not inconceivable that the editors would want to clarify the duration of the flood by including named dates to authenticate this. This answer does not, of course, preclude the idea that there were two accounts of the flood, one based on dates and the other on named months, and that the editing process merged the two.

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