

NOAH'S ARK AS METAPHOR

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The story of Noah's ark, understood as a metaphor, conveys a significant religious tenet, whereas as a factual occurrence it poses numerous problems. The foremost question that arises is how Noah, living as he did more than a thousand years before the Iron Age, could possibly have constructed a vessel of the size of the ark as described in the Bible. He would have had to accomplish this task without hammers, axes or saws with which to fell trees or cut to equal size those which nature had uprooted. To hold them together without nails is another unimaginable task. The history of shipbuilding tells of no vessel even remotely this size in the epoch in which Noah lived. Nor does the biblical text intimate that Noah found a vessel which had been constructed by heavenly sources; to the contrary, it says specifically that he was to build it.¹

Equally hard to imagine is how Noah could have harvested, transported and stored enough food to keep himself, his family and a very large assortment of animals – some of considerable size – alive for as long a period as the ark was occupied.² The question of the carnivorous species appears particularly problematic. Furthermore, archeology has so far discovered no evidence of a flood of this dimension having occurred at the time when Noah lived.³

The proper way to understand the narrative of Noah is as a metaphor. What is the lesson of this metaphor? There is one outstanding feature in the story of Noah and his ark which helps elucidate its meaning. The story of the ark is an almost exact parallel to the biblical report of the original Creation. In the beginning of the world, as reported in Genesis, the universe was a mass of water (Gen. 1:2). In Noah's time the destruction is carried out by reducing the earth to a surface where only water is in view. The first tangible act of creation (third day) was the appearance of dry land. In Noah's story the return to normalcy started with dry land's reappearance (Gen. 8:5).

The next step in the original Creation was plant life. The parallel thereto is the branch from an olive tree brought to the ark by the returning dove. This little episode, which seems to serve no practical purpose for Noah as he still

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cannot exit the ark, becomes important to show the symbolic parallel as outlined.

In the first Creation story this is followed by the creation of fish and birds. Fish did not need a new creation since they easily survived the flood. In Noah's time of creation, the dove which failed to return serves as the parallel. Thus, for a short time, the earth was once again inhabited by fish and birds only.

On the sixth day, God created land animals and humans. The emphasis placed on the fact that man and land animals left the ark to re-inhabit the earth at the same time (Gen. 8:15-19) could not be better explained than as a reference to the sixth day of creation.

In our comparison we left out the first, second and fourth day. Light and Heaven needed no recreation. Neither did the heavenly bodies, the determinants of seasons on earth. But to maintain the metaphorical parallel the text added a verse: *While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease* (Gen. 8:22).

The symbolic approach to the story of Noah and his ark appears to contradict the exact dates reported for the beginning of the rain and its termination. If, on the other hand, we can find that these dates themselves have a symbolic meaning, they no longer contradict the metaphorical approach. The dates of the beginning and the end of the rain are the exact opposites of the natural season of rain in the Near East. These dates therefore, the 17th of the second month (Iyar) and the 17th day of the seventh month (Tishri), being the opposite of the natural rainy season would serve to demonstrate that the story of the Deluge refers to a special act by the Creator and not a natural occurrence.⁴

Similarly, the geographical details of this story have value in an allegorical interpretation. The ark landed, so the text informs us, on Mount Ararat, when dry land reappeared. Of what interest can the name of the landing place be to future readers? Nor does the Bible ordain any future veneration of this mountain. As an allegory, however, this name expresses a meaning. Noah's father, Lemech, when naming his son, refers to the pre-deluge world as an earth *which God had cursed [asher ererah Hashem]* (Gen. 5:29). Noah, as predicted in his naming, was the one destined to lift this curse. Therefore, when the ark settled and a new world was to begin, it was on the spot where the curse ceased to exist (Ararat). The first part of the name of the mountain refers to

the word for cursed, *ererah* [or *arerah*]. The second part of the mountain's name may be a parallel to the word *yarat* as used in Numbers 22:32 and Job 16:11, where its meaning is "twisted" or "no longer present in its straight, original form". Mount Ararat, therefore, symbolizes the place where the aforementioned curse has ceased to exist.

The story of Noah's survival emerges, as we saw, as an almost exact parallel to the original creation of the world except for one, very significant, difference. Noah and his descendents are a species never to be destroyed. The Lord promised Noah and his children that there would never again be a deluge destroying all life (Gen. 9:11). Adam and his world only lasted a limited time; it was destroyed after ten generations. What was the transgression of the pre-Noah world in comparison to the generations following him? What exactly was the sin that made God wish to bring about the total destruction?

The text describes it by using the Hebrew word *hamas* (Gen. 6:11), usually translated as "violence". However, it has a broader meaning, as evidenced in Exodus 23:1 and Deuteronomy 19:16 where the meaning is "false", an untrue testimony by a witness before the court. What these two meanings have in common is the disregard for lawful justice. You can break the law by violently taking an object which belongs to another person or you can accomplish such a task by falsely testifying before a judge. The words *va-timale ha-aretz hamas* (Gen. 6:11) expresses the absence of law, be it God-given or man-made.

Noah himself represents the link between these two worlds. He was born during the days of *hamas* (dishonesty), lived through the re-creation, and entered a world in which man recognized the need for law. Herein lies the essence of this metaphorical tale. The Creator of the world – as seen in the biblical account – is the one who first brought about a man whose distinction was his superiority over the animals, but who was still not fully aware that without law he could not survive. Our Talmudic tradition speaks of the Seven Laws of Noah. We do not refer to the Laws of Adam.

The biblical God is thereby described as the one who created both, the perfect and the imperfect. Day and night, virtue and evil are equally His products. The prophet Isaiah spells this out in his statement, *I make peace and create evil* (Isa. 45:7). To teach this monotheistic tenet the Bible relates that the Lord saw fit to divide the story of man's creation into two parts. First

came the creation of the Adam-world which existed for only a limited time. It was a world in which man emerged as a being far superior to the animals despite the similarity of the bodies. The next world is the Noah-world which includes justice and laws. It is this newly created world for which a promise of unending existence could be given.

NOTES

1. Some suggest that the ark could have been constructed without metal tools: see Ralph K. Pederson, "Was Noah's Ark a Sewn Boat?", *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2005, pp. 19-23.
2. Ramban, Genesis 6:19, explains that this must all be considered miraculous.
3. Some have suggested that the Flood was a more localized occurrence; see Gerald Schroeder, *The Science of God* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), pp. 205-6.
4. The Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 11b-12a) also records the opinion that for the counting of months in the story of the Deluge we begin with Tishri. This is based on the idea that only from the Exodus onward Nisan was counted as the first month. According to the view that the calculation begins in Tishri, the Flood began and ended according to the normal rainy season, perhaps demonstrating that this new world was already being established as a world of set laws, as will be discussed later in the article.



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