

## What Do We Do With Noah?

When we think of the story of Noah and the Ark, most of us are likely to think of it as a children's story: an elderly fellow with a long, white beard and a long-suffering wife, who built a funny-looking ship in his backyard and improbably gathered all those cute animals. Those of us of a certain age will also think of Noah's skeptical and somewhat annoyed neighbor, Larry, the "ding" of a bell preceding the deep voice of God calling Noah's name ("Noah") and Noah's sarcastic response ("ri-i-ight"), and the "zhuba, zhuba" of Noah's saw cutting through all that wood. But whether or not we think of Bill Cosby's voice when we hear the name of Noah, generally we will think of the story of Noah's Ark as a charming fable, what students of literature call a "pourquoi" story, a tale of the origin of common things. From the time I was a little boy, my favorite pourquoi tales have been Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories. Published in 1902, the stories are addressed to "My Best Beloved" (Kipling had first told them to his eldest daughter, Josephine, who died of influenza in 1899 at age 6) and include such fantasies as "How the Whale Got His Throat," "How the Camel Got His Hump," "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin," "How the Leopard Got His Spots," and, my favorite, "The Elephant's Child." Do you know it? It begins like this:

"In the High and Far-Off Times the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no trunk. He had only a blackish, bulgy nose, as big as a boot, that he could wriggle about from side to side; but he couldn't pick up things with it. But there was one Elephant--a new Elephant--an Elephant's Child--who was full of 'satiabile curiosity, and that means he asked ever so many questions. And he lived in Africa, and he filled all Africa with his 'satiabile curiosities. He asked his tall aunt, the Ostrich, why her tail-feathers grew just so, and his tall aunt the Ostrich spanked him with her hard, hard claw. He asked his tall uncle, the Giraffe, what made his skin spotty, and his tall uncle, the Giraffe, spanked him with his hard, hard hoof. And still he was full of 'satiabile curiosity! He asked his broad aunt, the Hippopotamus, why her eyes were red, and his broad aunt, the Hippopotamus, spanked him with her broad, broad hoof; and he asked his hairy uncle, the Baboon, why melons tasted just so, and his hairy uncle, the Baboon, spanked him with his hairy, hairy paw. And still he was full of 'satiabile curiosity! He asked questions about everything that he saw, or heard, or felt, or smelt, or touched, and all his uncles and his aunts spanked him. And still he was full of 'satiabile curiosity!" If you want to know the answer to how the elephant got his trunk, you'll have to read the rest of the story.

But despite our tendency to treat the story of Noah as just another amusing tale for our own Best Beloveds, even a cursory reading of Genesis chapters six, seven, eight and nine reveals something very different indeed. This is a dark story concerning the destruction of nearly all life on Earth and God's complicity in that destruction. It is also a deeply theological story in which the Hebrew understanding of God is implicitly contrasted with the understandings of their neighbors. Yet finally, despite its horrific undertones, it is in fact a story of hope and perhaps our emphasis on the jollity of the rainbow is correct after all.

Nearly all ancient cultures had a story of a great flood. Those from the ancient Middle East are particularly well documented and well known. Many of you will likely have heard how closely the story of Noah resembles the Babylonian story of Utnapishtim, found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Scholars now believe that the story in Gilgamesh was itself based on an even earlier Sumerian epic about a flood survivor named Atrahasis. Why did this story of a great flood so seize the imaginations of the region? A recent scientific expedition sponsored by National

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Geographic may provide part of the answer. Underwater research by Robert Ballard has shown some possible evidence for a theory developed by two American scholars, geologists William Ryan and Walter Pitman, who theorize that the origin of the many legends in widely separated cultures lay in the melting of Ice Age glaciers from several thousands of years ago. During the Ice Age, the Black Sea was an isolated freshwater lake surrounded by farmland. About 12,000 years ago, toward the end of the Ice Age, as Earth began growing warmer, glaciers in the Northern Hemisphere began to melt. Oceans and seas grew deeper as a result. About 7,000 years ago, the Mediterranean Sea pushed northward, slicing through what is now Turkey. Funneled through the narrow Bosphorus Strait, the water flooded into the Black Sea with 200 times the force of Niagara Falls. The Black Sea rose, flooding coastal farm land. Seared into the memories of terrified survivors, the tale of the flood was passed down through the generations and eventually became, in various places, the Atrahasis Epic, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the story of Noah.

Of course, even if Ryan and Pitman's theory is true, it doesn't fully explain the ubiquity of flood sagas. Unless, like the Mormons, you believe that American Indians are actually the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, a Black Sea flood doesn't explain why the Lakota, the Cherokee, the Navaho, and many other tribes, including those in this area, also have stories of a great flood. The fact of the matter is that all civilizations develop around abundant sources of water and where there is water, there will be flood. Tsunamis, as we know, happen with dreadful result and the hurricanes from which our own Gulf Coast is still recovering and the cyclones and typhoons which battered Bangladesh and Myanmar are powered by storms at sea. All human beings have an intrinsic understanding of both the life-giving and the destructive forces of water.

So deeply ingrained is our awareness of the power of the unchecked flood, that it is one of our richest metaphors. Consider, for example, Psalm 69: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God." It is a lament that could have come from one of those unfortunates left behind by the Ark. But if you read a little further, it becomes clear that the Psalmist is not literally drowning; he is, instead, surrounded by enemies and what Hamlet would call "a sea of troubles." Whether we stand in actual daily danger of drowning or not, we understand what it is to be overwhelmed in life as by the sea.

So the universal dread of flood makes clear the universal appeal of stories like those of Atrahasis, Utnapishtim and Noah. And in the ancient world, there would have been also a universal understanding that such cataclysm could only be the work of a god or the gods or, in the case of Israel, the God. But just as with their monotheistic twist on the common creation story, the writers and editors of Genesis had their own unique take on the story of the great flood and God's part in it. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim offers no comment on the motive of the gods for unleashing the flood but a reason is given in the saga of Atrahasis. The Sumerians believed that humankind had been created as slaves for the gods and when the slaves grew too numerous and boisterous and disturbed the slumbers of the chief of the gods, he decided to wipe them out. This arbitrary and capricious act is far from the understanding of the Torah, in which Yahweh acts to clean the Earth and start again after the violence of men like Cain and Lamech has become the norm. For the Sumerians and Babylonians, human beings were created as little

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better than animals and are at the whim of their gods. For Israel, humankind was created “a little lower than the angels,” with the free will to obey or rebel against their Creator and with accountability for their choices.

The story of Noah we find in Genesis 6-9 is pretty clearly an amalgam of two or more existing stories – for proof of this, read the whole story and notice the inconsistencies in just how many of each kind of animal Noah transported – and scholars think it is likely that it took its final form during or just after the Babylonian Exile. Though elements of the story likely seem harsh to many of us, it would have been of great comfort to a pitiful band of exiles or returnees, eking out a precarious living either in the home of their conquerors or in the reconstruction of their shattered homeland. To begin with, it is their God who is in charge of the situation. Not the arbitrary gods of Sumer or Babylon, but Yahweh, who created humankind in the image of God. The Flood did not fall upon the earth simply because humans were noisy and annoying, but because humans had consistently chosen evil rather than good, following in the example of Cain. But God knew and God’s People hoped that humankind was capable of much better. To that tiny remnant of the Chosen, who had witnessed or heard their elders tell of the human flood of Babylonian soldiers who had wiped Jerusalem from the face of the Earth, it would have been comfort and hope indeed that God preserved the righteous remnant in Noah and his family and made with them the second great covenant in Torah between God and Humankind, sealed by the presence of the rainbow. It is easy to forget in our lives of relative ease, but it is enormously comforting, now as it was then, when one is surrounded by destruction, to cling to the hope that God is still in charge and that God’s good purposes will ultimately be worked out, even if we cannot see how.

Just as the Revised Common Lectionary leaves off the ending of the story, with God’s covenant and the rainbow, it also leaves off verses at the beginning. One of these in particular I find helpful to a more modern understanding of the story. For even if some of us, like the Jews of the Exile, would find sufficient hope in the presence of a just and almighty God in the midst of tragedy, some of us might find that to be cold comfort. But there is also, even in Genesis, the understanding of a loving God who suffers with us when we are in trouble, who even suffered alongside those whom the Flood destroyed. In Genesis 6:5-6, we read, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” How could it be anything but a tragedy in the story of God to go, in what our pew Bibles is only two and a half pages, from “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good,” to everything being corrupt, wicked, violent. Kathryn Matthews Huey, in her commentary on this passage, writes of how the stories in Torah are an attempt to “express their deep sense of this God full of loving-kindness but dealing with the consequences of our freedom and our sin: ‘a God who expresses sorrow and regret; a God who judges, but doesn’t want to, and then not in arbitrary or annihilative ways; a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including every animal and bird; a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world; a God open to change and doing things in new ways; a God who promises never to do this again....God, from creation on, continues to be open to and affected by the world.’”

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This understanding of “God With Us” reached its pinnacle in Jesus, who both taught and embodied the concept. Jesus taught that God is our Loving Parent, who loves the world, loves Creation so much that even the fate of a single sparrow is known, that even the hairs on our heads are numbered. Jesus taught that God’s gift to the world is grace, a love that treats those who come to the fields of the Lord at the end of the day just as well as those who labor all day long. And in our faith, we proclaim that God, in the human person of Jesus, suffered homelessness, ill treatment, even terrible death. It is part of the comfort of our faith that God in Christ stands in solidarity with us when we suffer and it is the basis of our hope that at the end of all things the glory of the Risen Christ shall be ours as well.

Just as Jesus taught us about the nature of God in his stories and in his life, so he taught us about our own nature as well and the true nature of humankind which Jesus reveals is far from that corrupt and violent tendency which the writers of Torah believed moved God to terrible grief and dreadful action. Jesus taught that our greatest calling, one he lived out, was to hear the cries of the suffering, to have compassion on them and to act on that compassion: to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked and to visit the prisoner and to comfort the sick, to help “the least of these.” On this Memorial Day, as we remember those who gave their lives in battle and all those we love who have died, we fulfill Paul’s calling to the Romans to weep with those who weep. As we continue to hear the news from Myanmar and from China and prepare to take up our One Great Hour of Sharing offering during Sundays in June, we continue to live out the call of compassion. And this, too, is part of the hope in the face of disaster; that in responding to the needs of our fellow humans, we come closest to being who God intended us to be from the very beginning.

So, what do we do with Noah? Do we relegate his story to the realm of children’s fables or do we dare plumb it for the truths that lie within it for the grown-ups? Do we reject it as too primitive, too dark, or can we see the hope that it carried for men and women so long ago? Can we claim the hope of a Loving Creator who will not abandon humankind, even when destruction is all around? Can we claim the hope of a grieving God, who stands with us in the very depths of our despair? In the image of that old man and his boat full of animals, can we see glimmers of Christ Jesus, fixed to a very different instrument of wood, riding out the storm of human hate and violence to offer a new beginning for all humankind and redemption for all Creation? And are we willing, as the Body of Christ, to take up that cross, that burden, not only to weep for those who perished, but to act for those who are perishing? Are we willing, though our boat may seem small and frail, to risk the world’s storms to bring Good News to the poor, to feed the hungry, to comfort the least of these? Are we willing, like the saints who have gone before us, to labor even when things seem hopeless, with the hope and courage that come from God? May we be so moved and strengthened by the Holy Spirit that in our lives every day, we lovingly act to heal the world. Amen.