Tumbainot

The Maasai (as recorded) · the plains of Kenya and Tanzania

Where It Comes From

The Maasai are a herding people of the high plains of Kenya and Tanzania. This story was written down by Moritz Merker, a German army officer in what was then German East Africa, and published in his book *Die Masai* in 1904.

It is included here partly because it raises an important question, which you will see at once.

What Happens

God loves a good man named Tumbainot, who has two wives and six sons. The rest of the people are sinful, but they have never yet killed one another.

Then a man named Nambija strikes a man named Suage dead. God decides to destroy humankind, but tells Tumbainot to build a wooden ark and go into it with his wives, his sons and their wives, and some of every kind of animal.

God sends rain until everything else is drowned. When the rain stops, Tumbainot sends out a dove, which comes back tired. Then he sends out a vulture with an arrow tied to its tail feather. It comes back without the arrow, so he knows it has landed on something dead, and the water must be going down.

The ark comes to rest on the plain, and the people and animals come out. Tumbainot sees four rainbows, one in each part of the sky, and knows that God's anger is over.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The first murder.

Who was saved, and how. A righteous man, his family, and the animals.

The boat or the refuge. A wooden ark.

What came after. Birds sent out, the ark landing on the plain, and four rainbows as a sign of peace.

You have probably noticed that this is very close to the story of Noah, with Maasai names and the clever vulture added. James Frazer, writing in 1918, judged that East African flood stories like this one were plainly versions of the Bible story that had come in through Christian or Muslim contact. Merker himself held a theory that the Maasai were descended from ancient Semitic peoples, and later scholars have asked whether he heard what he hoped to hear. Either way, this story shows why it matters who wrote a story down, and when.

THINK IT THROUGH

If a story was carried to a people from somewhere else and retold in their own way, does that make it any less theirs?

Sources

Moritz Merker, *Die Masai* (Berlin, 1904), pp. 265–267, as given in James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1918), ch. 4, with Frazer's judgment on its biblical origin.

Knut Holter, in *Scriptura* (2017), scriptura.journals.ac.za, on Merker's theory that the Maasai descended from Semitic peoples.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.