Manu and the Fish

Vedic India · the plains of northern India

Where It Comes From

The oldest telling of this story is in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (1.8.1), a Sanskrit prose book of ritual teaching written down roughly 800 to 500 years before Christ. It is not in the older Vedic hymns. The story was told again, and changed, in the *Mahabharata* and in later books called the Puranas.

Manu is the first ancestor of humankind in Indian tradition, a little like Adam and Noah rolled into one.

What Happens

One morning Manu is washing his hands, and a tiny fish comes into his palm. It asks him to protect it from the bigger fish, and promises that one day it will save him.

Manu keeps it in a jar. When it outgrows the jar he digs it a pond, and when it outgrows the pond he carries it to the sea. Before it goes, the fish tells him the year a flood will come and sweep every living creature away, and tells him to build a ship.

Manu builds the ship. When the water rises he goes aboard, and the fish swims up. He ties the ship's rope to the horn on the fish's head, and it tows him over the water to the northern mountains. There it tells him to tie the ship to a tree and to go down slowly as the water goes down.

Manu is the only person left. He makes an offering, and from it a woman comes into being. Through her, the human race begins again.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. In the oldest telling, no reason is given. The flood is simply coming, like a season.

Who was saved, and how. Manu alone, because he showed mercy to something small and weak.

The boat or the refuge. A ship, pulled by the fish to a mountain in the north.

What came after. An offering, a woman born from it, and a new human family. In later tellings the fish is revealed as a god: Brahma in the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu (as Matsya, his fish form) in the Puranas, and seven wise men sail with Manu.

Here the rescue grows out of one small kindness. Manu does not earn his place by being better than everyone else; he simply takes care of a frightened fish.

THINK IT THROUGH

Why might a story choose a tiny fish as the one who saves the world?

Sources

Shatapatha Brahmana 1.8.1, in Julius Eggeling's translation (Sacred Books of the East, vol. 12, 1882), as given in James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 183–185.

Later versions (Mahabharata, Matsya Purana, Bhagavata Purana): "Matsya", Wikipedia, and the sources it cites.

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