Noah and the Ark

The Israelites · ancient Israel

Where It Comes From

The story of Noah is told in the book of Genesis, chapters 6 to 9, the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. It is sacred Scripture to Jews and Christians, and Noah is honoured as a prophet in Islam (the Qur'an tells his story in its own way).

When Genesis took its final written form is debated. Many scholars place it in the sixth or fifth century BC, drawing on older material; others date it much earlier. Many scholars also see two earlier tellings woven together in the text, which would explain why some details are given twice. Others read it as one carefully built whole.

What Happens

God sees that the earth has become corrupt and full of violence, and that the thoughts of people's hearts are evil all the time (Genesis 6:5–13). It grieves him that he made them. But one man, Noah, walks with God and is righteous.

God tells Noah to build an ark of wood, 300 cubits long, 50 wide and 30 high (about 135 by 22 by 13 metres), and to bring his wife, his three sons and their wives, and pairs of every kind of animal (Genesis 6:14–22; seven pairs of the clean animals, 7:2).

The rain falls for forty days and forty nights, and the water rises over the highest mountains for 150 days (Genesis 7:12, 7:24). Every living thing on land outside the ark dies.

God remembers Noah, and the waters go down. The ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat (Genesis 8:4). Noah sends out a raven, and then a dove three times: the first time it comes back, the second time it brings an olive leaf, and the third time it does not return (8:6–12).

Noah comes out, builds an altar, and makes an offering (8:20). God promises never again to destroy all life by a flood, and makes a covenant with Noah, his descendants, and every living creature. The sign of that covenant is the rainbow (Genesis 9:8–17).

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Human violence and corruption. The cause is moral, and the story says God was grieved by it.

Who was saved, and how. Noah, his wife, their three sons and their sons' wives: eight people, along with the animals. Noah is chosen because he is righteous.

The boat or the refuge. A huge wooden ark, built to God's exact measurements.

What came after. An offering, a blessing, and a covenant with all living things, with the rainbow as its sign. The story ends not with fear but with a promise.

Compared with the Mesopotamian stories, there is one God instead of a quarrelling council; the reason for the flood is moral; no one is made immortal; and the ending is a promise to the whole earth. How Genesis relates to those older stories is talked about in the first book of this folder.

THINK IT THROUGH

The flood story in Genesis ends with a promise to "every living creature", not just to people. Why might that matter?

Sources

The Bible, Genesis 6:1–9:17. References are given in the text; the story is summarised here, not quoted.

“Genesis flood narrative”, Wikipedia, on dating and the two-source view, 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.