



# Back to the Beginning

## Week 2: Noah's Ark

Brian Mattson - 5/03/2026

For many of us who grew up in church, perhaps the most quintessential kids' Bible story is Noah's Ark. There's a lot of material in there that is just perfect for kids to hear about, parent volunteers to talk about, and nursery walls to be decorated with. You can probably remember a time, if you grew up in one of those kinds of churches, where your Sunday School teacher got out the felt board. She'd find the little felt Noah character and maybe his wife—though we don't know her name. Perhaps, there were felt figurines for his three sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth, and maybe their wives, too—though we don't know their names. (The ancient Israelites' culture—and really the entire Bible—was focused on the boys. A problem we are still unraveling today, unfortunately.)

Once the human characters made it onto the felt board in Sunday School, next came the giant boat—Noah's Ark. As a kid, I always thought that was a pretty cool name for a boat. An ark. I imagined it would've been humongous. Gigantic. Outrageous. Because a whole bunch of animals had to fit in that boat. Two of every kind of animal, male and female. Two by two they came. Felt giraffes and elephants. Monkeys and zebras. Deer and bunnies. All those animals getting along perfectly and walking in two lines, marching across the felt board. But—it was always the animals we didn't mind. I never saw any felt board characters for cobras, or panthers, skunks, or bats.

Following the animal procession, the rains came for 40 days and nights, and the ark floated on top of the waters. All the inhabitants were safe and, once the rains quit and the water subsided, Noah sent out a dove to make sure it was safe to disembark. And finally, there in the sky, God placed a rainbow as a promise to protect creation and never let the earth flood again. Does that sound about right to you? Did I miss anything from your felt-board Sunday School days? If you did not grow up in one of those churches with felt boards, they were amazing. Easily the best part about Sunday School.

I think, and correct me if I'm wrong, that the point of the Noah's Ark story for us as kids was how God saved people and animals from destruction, and then sent the rainbow as a sign of God's promise that the world would never flood again. As a lesson for kids, I think that premise works perfectly, but have you read the Noah story in the last 30 years? The ending is definitely not children's material, though we won't spend much time on Noah's conclusion today. And the actual details of the story—you know, the eradication of every living thing on the face of the earth—do not paint the picture of a good God, whose love we see in the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. So let's explore this story through more than a superficial reading of the text. And let's remember, as we explore, that this was not a story meant for us today. As I said a couple weeks ago, this is an ancient story, and one, we'll find out, that wasn't unique to the ancient Israelites.

Our protagonist, Noah, arrives on the scene when things are looking pretty bad for humanity. Lori talked last week about that first sin in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. What she didn't tell you was that it was just the first bite of the apple. Humanity just keeps screwing up. Adam and Eve's son, Cain, murders his brother, Abel, out of anger and jealousy. Another curse upon the ground, just like for his dad, Adam, and Cain is sent to wander. He isn't sentenced to death, though, and cities and civilizations rise up from his family tree. And just to reiterate how Genesis is not a science or history textbook, at this point in the story, Cain was the only child of the first two

humans, so how did he have kids? Let's not linger on that question though. Let's continue and find the significance of the Noah story to the ancient Hebrew people. They didn't even know what genes, DNA, or biology were!

Genetics questions aside, generations rise up from the cursed line of Cain, while another line comes from the third son of Adam and Eve, Seth. From his line we finally get Noah, whose name means *rest*, ten generations after Adam and Eve. And humanity needs a break from all the toiling and tending the tough ground, making a living from the dirt. Noah is destined to offer humanity rest, or at least a reset, but only because God was so despondent with the wickedness of humans.

**The LORD saw that the wickedness of humans 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 humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air—for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.**

**- Genesis 6:5-8**

I know this sounds harsh. There's no escaping that. But we have to set aside our 21<sup>st</sup>-century brains for a moment and remember these were ancient people writing about why this massive flood happened. *How could God have allowed this to happen? Humankind must have screwed up pretty bad this time.* Natural disasters were explained as the result of divine judgment or annoyance with mortals. The ancient Hebrew people weren't unique in this thought process. Many ancient cultures around the world made sense of natural events by way of spiritual decree, and honestly, it's not hard to believe people would think that way. Even today, people say terrible acts or sicknesses are the result of certain people's sins. Let's not pretend we are so different from ancient humans.

And speaking of differences, or maybe similarities, Noah's story isn't the only one in the ancient Near-East about a man destined to save humanity from a flood. There are actually two stories older than Noah that share many of the same characteristics. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the story of Atrahasis, there are also characters who are chosen to save humanity (and animals) by building a massive boat with precise dimensions, who then survive the flood with their families, send out birds to discover when it is safe to exit, and make a sacrifice to the gods in exchange for the deity's promise not to flood the world again.

If that's the first time you are hearing about these similar ancient stories—stories that predate the Noah narrative—I want to give you a second to soak all that in. I understand that it can be a lot. Yes, there are older flood stories featuring nearly identical aspects. So what can we make of this?

The first is to go ahead and throw away the idea that there was ever a global flood that covered all the mountains. There is no scientific or geological evidence for that. And that's okay! Just like we discussed during the creation poem, not everything is literal in the Bible. In fact, more often than not, things are meant to be studied and pondered.

The second thing to note is that the ancient Hebrew people, like their cultural neighbors, probably did share a story or stories of terrible floods in the past, and the oral traditions that rose from those events became varied and passed down through generations. There actually IS some scientific evidence for a terrible flood in the ancient near-East around 3000 BCE, which very well could be the impetus for these flood stories.

Ok, now let's get to the good part—or bad part, in this case—the flood. If you do a close reading of the text, you'll start to notice that things don't quite add up. Sometimes we lose things in the details of scripture because we gloss over them, and for the most part, are not Old Testament scholars. *This is another in a long line of reasons why we should read scripture with a good study*

*bible or a good commentary.* I have missed those details in the past because my default Noah story is the one from my Sunday School felt board. But, biblical scholars mostly agree that the narrative we have in Genesis 6–9 is actually an interwoven story from two different accounts.

It's either two different accounts, or it was written by someone with a *really* terrible eye for details. There are contradictions in the number of animals Noah brings on the ark. A difference in the duration of the flood. Scripture says the water comes from rain, then says it was because the "fountains from the great deep burst forth." Noah sends ravens, but then he also sends doves to determine when it is safe to leave the ark. These differences are not a reason to toss the story aside, but another piece of the puzzle to help us understand that the Noah story is made up of two (or more) oral traditions woven together by later editors. One commentary I read puts it this way:

**The combination of the two versions of the flood into one narrative provides a way of preserving the richness of divergent traditions about the flood while also maintaining a single story line, albeit with some tensions.**

Besides, if you were going to throw this story away for any reason, it would probably be from the logistical and natural impossibilities. Imagine a small family living inside a ship that was half the size of the Titanic, caring for thousands of animals, removing their waste, storing their food, etc. And this wasn't just a one week excursion. In fact, it wasn't just 40 days and 40 nights. Scripture says they were in the ark about a year. One whole year! Could you imagine feeding two elephants for an entire year, let alone all the snakes, bears, and big cats? And after feeding them the natural digestive process takes place. Over and over again for a year. With only one door on the side of the ark. And there are eight people doing all of this work. Feeding and cleaning, feeding and cleaning. And I didn't even mention dinosaurs. How did they fit some of those dinosaurs on the ark? Do you think the ancient writers had any clue that dinosaur fossils were buried underneath their feet? There

are museums and attractions that make a case for this being a literal, historical event. I completely understood that line of thinking and the allure of the exhibits. We want archeologists to discover a boat at the top of a mountain because our modern minds desire certainty. We want to be able to say, "See! The Bible is true. My beliefs are right!" Proof feels good, but that's not the point of this story, in my opinion. Still, the ancient Israelites had to explain these terrible local floods. Author and Professor Pete Enns says:

**For ancient Israel, as for other ancient cultures, a cataclysmic and tragic flood had to be explained *somehow*. And Israel's explanation was no more a "historically accurate" account than the others. But Israel's explanation does tell us quite a bit about *how they understood God and the place of humanity in God's world by way of contrast with other cultures around them.***

**- Pete Enns**

And the basic premise was not that God wanted to destroy humanity because they were being too loud and causing divine headaches. No, the flood story is about a God who resets order in a world of chaos, sin, and wickedness. God chooses Noah and transports the Image of God—us; humanity—to safety through divine deliverance. And how does God do that? Through a set of careful instructions for a holy vessel—the ark.

You see, the ark wasn't a boat, as much as we like to think it is. There was no sail, no rudder, no place for oars to stick out. It was something else entirely. Even the word *ark*, which some translations render as boat, means something different. It's an Egyptian loan word, and it means a chest or shrine for an idol, or a coffin. And these arks, these little shrines, were commonplace in ancient Egyptian temples. One ancient near-East scholar, Abraham Yahuda, writes:

**Whereas [the word *tebah*] is applied to a ship in the flood story it is being used in its real meaning of 'chest, holy shrine, or coffin.'**

**Such a chest generally had the form of a divine shrine, and served as housing for images of the gods which were dedicated to temples.**

**- Abraham Yahuda**

So this thing God tells Noah to build, with very specific instructions, is not so much a boat as it is a sacred vessel to house the Image of God. Interesting. And you know what else is interesting? The only other time that specific loan word—*tebah*—is used in the Bible is to describe the basket that carried Moses safely down the river. Another moment of divine deliverance across water. It's almost like these ancient writers wanted the audience to connect the threads. And the links to Moses don't end there. Remember, Moses was the man who received specific instructions for constructing the tabernacle—the holiest place that housed the ark of the covenant—which symbolized God's presence with the Israelites. And the use of the word *ark* in this instance is actually different than the word for Noah's Ark, but scholars believe the authors wanted us to make that connection.

And if we take a look at the dimensions and layout of Noah's Ark, you'll notice a similar three-tiered structure to the tabernacle and also Solomon's Temple. Places where God dwelled. Ordered spaces that were sacred for the ancient Israelites. And Noah's Ark was also a symbolic temple, a holy place where God's image dwelled. And temples were earthly reflections of Eden—the original sacred space for God to interact with humans.

So in a world that had devolved into sin and wickedness, God chose Noah to be a new "Adam," to build a new "Eden," where God's image would be safe. And inside that temple, that holy shrine—the ark—God protected creation, so that an ordered and balanced world could spring forth again. Scholar Michael Morales says:

**The ark functions as a substitute Cosmos and refuge from the destruction of the ordered world. Once this mini world is made,**

**such that it is suitable for inhabitants, it is filled up with living creatures: wildlife, herd animals, creepers, birds, humans, so that it is a creation in miniature... Noah's three-decked ark, symbolizing a temple, constitutes a microcosm of the heavens and the Earth with living creatures to boot.**

**- L. Michael Morales**

Here again, just as in the creation story of Genesis one, God's spirit is hovering over the waters, ready again, to make order from chaos.

This isn't a historically accurate tale about an angry God who wants to drown all living things because we screwed up. I sure hope that's not what's going on here. Because the God who poured out his love, who gave the world Jesus to teach us a better way, the God of all creation surely had other options at his disposal. But that's not what's going on here, in my opinion. Rather, this is an ancient story that fits into a shared ancient culture, but says something different about this God of Israel. This God preserves life when it seems like evil is winning. This God is powerful enough to hold chaos at bay. This God is strong enough to make a way when it seems there is none. This is the God of great floods and felt boards, who meets humanity when things are bleak to offer a rainbow of hope.

People wonder why they should read the Bible anymore. Things have changed so much in the last 3000 years, and I agree. They have changed. But people are the same. We are all wondering how we got here, what's our purpose, and does God even care? Why do bad things like torrential rains, floods, and softball sized hail happen? Where is God in natural disasters? And if I read the Noah story as an adult without the help of notes, commentaries, and videos, I might scratch my head and think, *well, that was weird*. But the Bible is full of intrigue, humor, and especially hope. We just have to be willing to dig a little deeper. Or at the very least remember the lessons you learned on those felt boards. That even when you read weird things in scripture, God cares about you, about animals, about all of Creation. And God is trusting us

to work with him in this world, reflecting boundless love everywhere we go. Each one of us, little temples—arks, *tebahs*—carrying God's image forward.