

Genesis 6:9-22 **Building the Ark**

There is no story more universal in the ancient world than that of a great flood. Consider, as only a sampling, the following stories, which have been condensed significantly.

Akkadian

Enlil, the greatest of the Gods, was tired of the noise of men, as it kept him from sleeping. He decided to wipe out humanity, but Ea, a god who has sworn an oath to protect mankind, told Utnapishtim in a dream. Utnapishtim built a boat and escaped with his family and a few animals.

Babylonian

Atrahasis, the wisest king on earth, was warned of a coming disaster. He built a boat and, knowing the earth would be destroyed and that he could only save a few, threw a great celebration so that all his people might have one glorious day before they were destroyed.

Chinese

A fearsome war leader ripped a hole in the sky and water came out and enveloped the earth. Only a wise queen and a few warriors escaped to a high mountain where they were saved.

India

A fish warned the wise king, Manu, that a flood was coming. Manu built a boat and survived the flood that destroyed the earth.

Mayan

Four hundred young men survived the flood by turning into fish. After they survive the flood, they celebrate by getting drunk. They then become the Pleiades (a constellation).

Peruvian

A llama refused to eat and when its owner asked why, the llama said that it was because in five days the earth would be flooded. The man climbed the highest mountain, survived, and repopulated the earth. (No woman is mentioned, which seems an important oversight).

In the biblical narrative, God desired to return the earth to the pre-Creation state after the heavens and earth had first been created, but dry land had not yet appeared. The cause was this. Man, as created, had been “very good” but had since fallen into sin. Man's wickedness had spread with him throughout the earth. Though there were glimpses of the *imago dei* as God had originally intended, ultimately all had been ruined. God, being holy, could not tolerate sin indefinitely. Sin must be punished, and God chose to do so by destroying all life in a great Flood. Yet grace remained. Noah, and his family, would be chosen by God to be saved. From them, mankind would begin again.

Noah

Here the author begins the *tōlēdōt* of Noah. This is the centerpiece of chapters 1-11 in the book of Genesis. It is one of the defining moments in salvation history in that it demonstrates that God not only judges human sin, but also provides a means of redemption.

The author's description of Noah is very generous. He writes that Noah was "a righteous man, blameless in his time" (v. 9). As if to make his point unmistakable, the author even adds that "Noah walked with God" (v. 9). Noah's righteousness became renowned among the Israelites. For example, "'even though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job were in its midst, by their own righteousness they could only deliver themselves,' declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 14:14). And Noah continued to be considered as an exemplar of righteousness in the early Church, "by faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

The word for 'righteous' is *tsaddiq*, which refers to a person who has faithfully obeyed God's laws. It describes a person who has met a given standard of conduct. It does not mean someone who is occasionally righteous, but rather a person who is righteous as a matter of habit. In the Bible, there is no sense of a person being considered 'righteous' because they follow God's commands some of the time. In fact, it was even used to describe the character of God and His law,

"The Rock! His work is perfect,
For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

The word 'blameless' is *tāmîm*, which means someone who is a person of integrity. It is often used in the Old Testament to describe an animal without defect, worthy to be presented as an offering to God. For example, in giving instructions as to the observance of the first Passover, God said, "your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats" (Exodus 12:5). Noah was not perfectly sinless, of course, but he was 'wholesome' or 'sound' which is how the word is used with reference to people. "Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,

'I am God Almighty;
Walk before Me, and be blameless'" (Genesis 17:1).

In other words, while it is not possible to think that Noah never sinned, it is clear that obedience to God was a defining quality of his character. Yet, there are no specific examples given as to why Noah was so distinguished as a righteous and blameless person. That no explanation is given, perhaps, is further evidence that Noah's righteousness was not because of anything he had done, but because of God's work of grace in his life.

The Earth

The earth was corrupt. So much so that it seems the author cannot emphasize its depravity enough.

“¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” (v. 11-12). The word for corrupt is used three different times in the two sentences.

Both God and the author concur that the earth was corrupt. There was no arguing the point. God is thoroughly justified in executing judgment. The reference to violence underscores the fact. It is a word that describes the harmful actions of one person against another.

“You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness” (Exodus 23:1).

“⁵Simeon and Levi are brothers;
Their swords are implements of violence.
⁶Let my soul not enter into their council;
Let not my glory be united with their assembly;
Because in their anger they slew men,
And in their self-will they lamed oxen” (Genesis 49:5-6).

Perhaps one way to look at the event is that God destroyed what was already self-destructing.

A God of Details and an Act of Obedience

In this section of verses, we see that God made a speech to Noah. Each part of the speech contained an announcement of what God intended to do, and then an instruction for Noah to follow. To illustrate,

Announcement - “The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth” (v. 13).

Instruction - “Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood” (v. 14).

Announcement - “I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven” (v. 17).

Instruction - “you shall enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife, and your sons’ wives with you” (v. 18).

God’s intentions were certain, “the end of all flesh has come before Me . . . I am about to destroy them with the earth (v. 13). The destruction would include all men and animal, and even plant life, Noah and his family alone excepted. God indulges Noah with an explanation for His action. We can recall God’s conversation with Abraham about His impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Noah, like Abraham, had such an intimate relationship with God that God chose to reveal His ways to him.

God told Noah to build an ark. It was a command. “Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood” (v. 14). No mention is made of Noah’s response. Indeed, Noah does not speak at all in the narrative. We know neither what he says, nor what he thinks. But what we can clearly see is that he obeyed.

So Noah's faith was not demonstrated by his words but by his deeds. He simply obeyed. His righteousness was manifest in his actions. In fact, nowhere is it recorded that Noah protested that God's punishment was too extreme (as Abraham did when told of the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah).

We have no idea how long it took Noah to build the ark. We do not know what others around him thought, but we can imagine! We can wonder if Noah's distinctiveness as a righteous man so set him apart from his contemporaries that he was considered bizarre even before he began to build a boat that was longer than a modern football field. It may be that Noah tried to convert his fallen and wicked neighbors as he worked, even as they must have mocked and ridiculed him. Peter described Noah as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5).

We do not know what Noah did as employment (I think we can assume he was not a shipbuilder, though he may have been involved in constructing small boats used for river trade), but perhaps he worked with carpentry. More likely, though, is that Noah's expertise was irrelevant. God demanded no special skills of Moses when he commanded him to oversee the building of the tabernacle. To be sure, Moses had access to skilled craftsmen who supplied the technical knowledge required, but it is worth considering that God makes use of His people for His purposes as He sees fit. Sometimes we are given tasks that fit our skill set, other times we are not. Our comfort level, either technically or with regards to personality, is not at issue when it comes to obeying God.

What we do know is that God knew exactly the kind of vessel He wanted built. God even specified the wood to be used in its construction. Gopher wood was probably some kind of resinous wood. The word is used only here in the Old Testament, so comparison is impossible. God also told Noah to "make the ark with rooms, and shall cover it inside and out with pitch" (v. 14). Again, specificity eludes us, as the only other time the word for 'pitch' is used in Scripture is in describing the basket used to carry the infant Moses. But we can assume it was some kind of resin to help resist water damage and prevent leakage. After all, the ark was constructed entirely of wood and, as we shall, see would need to stay afloat for about a year. As for the number of rooms, we can only guess, but we can imagine dozens of compartments used to house the various animals that would come aboard.

In order to be certain that Noah built a vessel that would meet His needs, God even specified the size of the ark. "This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits" (v. 15). A cubit was approximately 18 inches, so that means the ark was about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. A giant shoe box comes to mind. The vessel was probably flat bottomed, I cannot envision Noah construction a device allowing him to build the boat above the ground, and was likely not tapered at the corners.

The vessel displaced approximately 43,000 tons of water. For comparison, in the Babylonian flood narrative, Utnapishtim's vessel is 180 feet wide, long and tall - a perfect cube. A very symmetrical construction, but impossibly seaworthy even in the best of weather. Though Noah's ark was much smaller than modern passenger liners, it was much larger than any of the three ships Columbus used to

navigate his way to the Americas three thousand years later. The flagship of that voyage was the *Santa Maria* which was only about 62 feet long and displaced a mere 150 tons of water.

Interestingly, the word for ark, *tēbāh*, is only used elsewhere in Exodus 2. “³But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. . . . ⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her” (Exodus 2:3, 5). Here it is translated basket, but its function is the same. It was designed to protect its precious cargo from the dangers of traveling on water.

This connection between Noah and Moses suggests other similarities. Both narratives involved the salvation of people by water - Noah the Flood and Moses the Red Sea. Both would deal with the concepts of clean and unclean animals. Both would take part in burnt offering sacrifices. And both were great builders - Noah the ark and Moses the tabernacle.

So particular was God, that He even specified some of the features of the ark. “You shall make a window for the ark, and finish it to a cubit from the top; and set the door of the ark in the side of it; you shall make it with lower, second, and third decks” (v. 16). This configuration would provide a deck area of 95,700 square feet. There was more than enough room to accommodate the animal life God brought aboard.

Much has been made of the ‘window’ mentioned, since the Hebrew word is the same as used to describe a roof. A window (think skylight) would provide light and, if opened, air flow. A pitched roof that overhung the sides of the ark 18 inches above the sides of the boat and upheld by its supporting posts could do much the same. The problem is further complicated because there are perfectly useful Hebrew words for both ‘window’ and ‘roof’ yet the author used neither in this description. There was also a door, that will be featured in the narrative later, but the main point here is to demonstrate that God was very specific in His plans for the ark, and Noah was matched that with his diligence in completing the task as assigned.

God condescended to emphasize to Noah why he was being asked to build an ark. Restating Himself, God said, “I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish” (v. 17). This was a great kindness. Noah could not have been anything other than puzzled by the command to build an enormous water vessel in the middle of the Mesopotamian desert. Certainly the rivers had flooded, it was an annual fear, but it was never anything one could not simply move away from on foot. Crops might be lost and the occasional home or even village destroyed, but that was all.

This was going to be something completely different. This was something no one had ever seen, or could foresee. There is no reason to interpret the text as simply exaggeration or a phenomenological description from Noah’s limited perspective. All flesh would be destroyed. The entire earth would be covered by the floodwaters. The logic for a non-universal Flood eludes me. If God chose to purge the earth of wickedness by destroying humankind, and others beside Noah were spared, then why did God bother to spare Noah? If others were spared, they must have been at least as righteous as Noah. And if it

was a localized Flood, then it only destroyed those living in the area dominated by the (relatively) faithful Sethite line, not the wicked Cainite line that had moved further east.

This Flood was to overwhelm the earth and, therefore, for this Flood, an ark was required. So Noah set about gathering the materials and developing the means to construct the ark. This must have been a daunting challenge. It was to motivate Noah, and to assure him that this was no mere idle exercise to determine the depth of his faith, God told Noah that his very life depended upon his obedience.

Offering this assurance, God not only told Noah what he would do to “all flesh,” but God promised Noah that he would be spared. “But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife, and your sons’ wives with you” (v. 18). That Noah is the center of this covenant, is emphasized by the repeated use of the words ‘you’ and ‘yours’. Scripture has other examples where a family is positively influenced by a single righteous member.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14).

“¹In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, ²as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.” (1 Peter 3:1-2).

And this covenant was a unilateral commitment on God’s part. There were no conditions. The common language for entering into a covenant is to “cut a covenant,” since it usually involved animal sacrifice. Since those rituals had not yet been established, the text here simply reads “establish my covenant.” God chose to establish His covenant with Noah. Covenants were integral to the relationship between the Israelites and their God. This particular covenant format was similar to that of other ANE cultures where the deity bestowed a gift upon a deserving individual. In scripture, the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are most similar. The key here, though, is that this covenant is God’s sovereign choice. It is God Who initiates the covenant.

God had concern for a remnant. “¹⁹And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ²⁰Of the birds after their kind, and of the animals after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive. ²¹As for you, take for yourself some of all food which is edible, and gather it to yourself; and it shall be for food for you and for them” (v. 19-21).

It is clear that all animal life is represented here (excepting, of course, the fish who would have no problem surviving the Flood). Despite the wickedness of humanity, God continues His provision. The gathering of such a vast collection of animals has often seemed to make the narrative border on the mythological, but there is no reason to think that Noah needed to go out and roundup all the animals himself. Like Adam in the garden, it is reasonable to think that God brought the animals to Noah.

Also, the word 'kind' is used as it was in the original account of creation. That is, the Bible is not implying that Noah acquired even single species of every different animal on earth. The concept of species was not defined with zoological distinction in the ancient world. The assortment of birds, animals, and creeping things was inclusive of all the animals alive. That they were brought in "male and female" further indicates God's sovereign plan of continuing to populate with earth with the animal kingdom as He would allow Noah and his family to do with respect to mankind.

Finally, the author concludes with a very brief statement of Noah's response. As we have mentioned, Noah was not recorded as saying anything to God's unusual command. But that he heard and understood is clear enough from his response. "Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did" (v. 22). Note importantly that Noah did 'all' that God commanded. He did not omit the more difficult or unwelcome challenges. He did not select from a list of choices as to what he might obey. God commanded, and whatever God commanded, Noah did. He did not argue about the size of the task at hand. He did not quibble about the dimensions of the ark. He did not dispute the arrangement of the rooms, decks, or window. Noah simply heard the word of God and obeyed.

Takeaways

There are many details in the narrative. While we do not know where Noah built the ark, how long it took him to do so, or whether he had any help (it seems an extraordinary undertaking). We do know what kind of wood was used in construction, the dimensions of the vessel, its division into decks and rooms, how it was secured against leakage, the list of people on board, and its non-human occupants. Clearly our God is a God of details. That is, small things matter to God. We might well consider the small things of our life; the details of our faith and discipleship.

And, as we understand this, its implications for us are that we are to obey in the small things as well as the large. If God commands specifically, He expects us to obey explicitly. We do not possess the right of interpretation with the commands of God. Noah did not question the fact that there was no precedent for what he was being asked to do. He did not remind God that he had no experience in such an endeavor. Despite what must have been the constant irritant of scoffers mocking him, Noah went about a task that can only have seemed impossible. But as we know, God supplies what is needed for us to obey the commands He has set for us.