



5 prayer prompts

Savoring ancient bible stories in Christian life

The story of Noah's Ark is filled with vivid images, dynamic stories, concrete symbols. Since childhood have you ever paused to dwell on these images and symbols, to play with them, to allow each one to speak to you afresh as an adult Christian? Here is your chance!

1. Rainbow

The rainbow... A symbol of covenant and reconciliation. Don't pass by a rainbow without lifting up your eyes and heart to God and remembering God's fidelity to divine promises.

2. Flood waters

When you drink, shower, swim, recall the potency of water as a biblical symbol; e.g., waters of creation, of the flood, of the Nile, of the Red Sea, of the Jordan, of birth, of baptism...

3. Ark

Noah's ark is not a boat as in other ancient flood stories but a floating

vessel without rudder, sail or crew! It depends not on human skill but on the will of God.

4. Animals

Noah is instructed by God to gather 'all creatures of every kind' (Gen. 7:14). Does this choice of words sound familiar? Compare with the creation account in Gen. 1:24-25.

5. Dove

Reflect on the biblical image of the dove bearing an olive leaf, a sign of hope to Noah that the flood waters had decreased (Gen. 8:11).

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Just as rain comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the Torah; one studies a bit today and some more tomorrow, until in time one becomes like a flowing stream."

Song of Songs Rabbah

Light of Torah encourages Christians to reflect upon the Torah (the first five books of the bible) with the help of Jewish sources and insights. In doing so, we remember that it was from the Jewish people that we first received the scriptures, and that Christianity did not emerge out of the blue; it was planted in the rich soil of Jewish faith.

How does a Christian parishioner get in touch with this 'rich soil'? A simple way to begin is to read this leaflet series. It makes accessible some of the gems of insight passed down through centuries of Jewish biblical reflection. In the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission:

"Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion."

(Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 1993)



Genesis 6:9—11:32

Noah: 'Noah'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 6:9–11:32

The story of Noah's Ark is well known and loved by Christians from childhood. Yet how many of us have ever explored the character of Noah through a Jewish interpretative lens? Read the Noah story (or read, at least, chapter 6 of Genesis). Then focus on the opening verses and join the sages of Israel as they open up a surprising topic of debate...

1. *Bereshit Rabbah*.

2. Rashi: 11th C., France. Considered greatest of Jewish Torah commentators. Quoted in Leibowitz, 63.

Bibliography: *Etz Hayim: Torah & Commentary* (NY: JPS, 2001); *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1989); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007). Scripture: *JPS*

Tasting Torah

In the opening verse of our Torah portion we read: “Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6:9).

A straight-forward verse complimenting Noah, right? Not so for the sages of Israel! Through centuries of Torah reflection we find a lively debate as to whether Noah's righteousness was all that it appeared to be. Pause to ponder this, revisiting Genesis 6:9 and its surrounding verses. Why do you think Noah's virtue might be called into question?

Touching Torah

The sages were intrigued by the phrase ‘in his age’ and interpreted this qualification in diverse ways, some to Noah's credit and others to his discredit. E.g., Noah might have been blameless ‘in his age,’ but what a wicked age it was. If Noah had lived in a righteous age he would have seemed mediocre by comparison. Then again, argued others, it is very difficult to be righteous in the midst of wickedness, therefore Noah's efforts are all the more praiseworthy!

Noted, too, was how Noah and Abraham reacted differently in the face of God's anger. Abraham begged for God's mercy on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33), yet there was no such outcry from Noah when he heard of God's intention to destroy the earth. He simply went about building an ark, presumably concerned only for his and his family's salvation. [See Faith & Life at right]

Depthing Torah

The sages probed the Hebrew text further, noting that while Noah walked ‘with’ God (6:9), Abraham walked (literally) ‘before’ God (17:1). In the creative storytelling traditions of Judaism known as ‘midrash’ there is the voice of Rabbi Yehudah who depicts Noah as sinking in the mire of a godless generation but with the desire to extricate himself.¹ Unable to do so, God comes to his aid saying, ‘walk with me.’ Abraham, by contrast, was stronger in virtue. Says Rashi,² “Noah needed support, but Abraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness by himself.” Further, Abraham was charged with a divine mission to announce God's word to others; but Noah could save only himself. Noah's path was one of survival, Abraham's was a path of mission.

What is gained by such imaginative comparisons between biblical characters? If we find ourselves lulled into a one-eyed view of a bible story, the sages remind us that the Word of God invites multiple interpretations, that it calls for our active engagement, and that it is a holy task to bring our questions of faith—robust, surprising and challenging—to our reading of the text.

Doing Torah

- Are we Catholics too ‘polite’ with the bible? What do the sages teach us by their insistent questioning and lively debates?
- What do you think... Was Noah a righteous man? What does it take to be righteous?



Faith & Life

Think about it: God has just announced to Noah that he is going to annihilate the world, and Noah voices no objection! Does he not have a single question to ask God as he builds his ark? Does he have no concern for the human race about to perish? Is he bent only on saving his own household? How different he is to Abraham who cries out to God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33). And to Moses who begs God not to destroy the Israelites after the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32:7-14).

This ancient text confronts us with timeless questions. At what point does obedience cease to be a faith response and become ‘blind obedience’? How do we relate to God—as passive robots or as full-blooded disciples willing to embrace the anguish and holy struggles of our world?