



A Fresh Look at Three Biblical Greats: Noah, Abraham and Moses

Jack Driscoll, CFC

Archaeology of the Word

- 1. What do we mean by Archaeology of the Word?**
(Digging into the plain reading of the biblical text.)
- 2. Why do we do Archaeology of the Word?**
(The bible, the divinely revealed Word of God, is an invitation to us to engage in conversation with Him.)
- 3. How do we know where to dig into the biblical text?**
(There are *clues*, like ‘flashing yellow lights,’ in the biblical text itself.)
- 4. How do we do this digging?**
(Relying on our own life’s stories; reading the text aloud; reading the text alertly, in havrutah; sometimes with the help of commentaries, a teacher, etc.)
- 5. What is an example of a clue, of a ‘flashing yellow light’ in the biblical text?** (One of the most outstanding clues is the use of *repetition*. This could be repetition of a word, of a phrase, of a language similarity. We’ll do some Archaeology of the Word in havrutah by considering similar serious incidents in the lives of Noah, Abraham and Isaac. We’ll try to notice the clue of repetition in each incident. Then we can ask what might be learned from the reactions of these three biblical great men in these serious encounters with God.)
- We’ll begin our Archaeology of the Word by considering the ‘newspaper reports’ on the deaths of three men of the Old Testament as these accounts are recorded in the Bible. Based on what’s said in their ‘death notices,’ we can wonder if there are any aspects of their personalities upon which we could make a comment?

Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. The length of Noah’s life was nine hundred fifty years. And he died. (See Gen. 6:9; 9:28. *NRSV*)

When **Abraham** was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him, and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me. Be blameless.” The length of Abraham’s life was one hundred seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave in Hebron with his wife Sarah. (see Gen. 17:1; 25:7-10)

The LORD said to **Moses**, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the mouth of the Lord. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. (see Deut. 34:4-8)

7. God plans destruction on earth and shares it with Noah. How does Noah respond?

The Book of Genesis begins with the creation story: God’s work was good, it was very good. But soon thereafter the LORD is heartbroken by wickedness all across the land.

And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings 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. [*His name means rest, refreshment.*] Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. And you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark. (see Gen.6:6-20)

Now, how does Noah respond to God?

- Gen. 6:22 Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.
- Gen. 7:5 And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.
- Gen. 7:9 Two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.
- Gen. 7:16 And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.
- Gen. 8:18. Still Noah remained in the ark until the Lord said, "Go out of the ark...and Noah came out."

Did you notice the repetition?

Perhaps, then, this unquestioning obedience is the reason that we can say that Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.

But...hold on a minute. Some of the Rabbis and Sages have a problem with Noah. What do you think might be their problem?

Here's what some of the Rabbis and the Sages say:

Yes, Noah is obedient, very much so. But Noah is so very passive! Nowhere did Noah show a feeling of sadness and pathos that an entire generation was to be lost, and the world destroyed. At no time did a word of concern or solicitude escape Noah's lips. It was as though he stood apart from the rest of the world. Nowhere was there an expression of tenderness, of regret that even though these men were wicked, they would be lost: they, their wives and their children. He did not leap forward with a request to God to spare those who, perhaps with the extension of greater mercy, might have been spared.

(Plaut: The Torah, A Modern Commentary, p.65.)

Yes: it is certainly true: *Noah did all that the LORD commanded him. Noah was blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.* But what do you think: did Noah do enough? Is unquestioning obedience enough? Is something 'more' required of us? Or expected of us?

8. God plans destruction on earth and shares it with Abraham. How does Abraham respond?

There is something terribly wrong in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah on the shores of the Dead Sea in Canaan (Palestine, Israel.) Yes, there is evidence of grave immorality. And there is also evidence of grievous social injustice. Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: *she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy* (Ezek. 16:49.) The Lord decides to destroy these cities and he shares this decision with Abraham. Earlier, the Lord had selected Abraham to be his great ally in spreading the belief in the oneness of God. So now the Lord said:

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.

Now, how does Abraham respond to God?

So Abraham came near and said to the Lord, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. (see Gen. 18)

Did you notice the repetition?

Can you comment on any differences between Noah's response and Abraham's response to God's plan for disaster? Is there, perhaps, a hint in what the sacred text says about them?

Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. (Gen.6)

The LORD appeared to Abraham, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me. Be blameless. (Gen. 17)

Here's what some of the Rabbis and the Sages say:

Noah walked with God. Rabbi Judah said, "The phrasing may be understood from a parable of a king who had two sons, one grown up and the other a child. To the child he said, 'Walk with me,' but to the adult, 'Walk before me.' Likewise, to Abraham, whose (spiritual) strength was great, he said, 'Because you are wholehearted, walk before me.' But to Noah, whose (spiritual) strength was feeble, Scripture says, 'Noah walked with God.'

9. God plans destruction on earth and shares it with Moses. How does Moses respond?

The Israelites had been in bondage in Egypt for over 400 years when the Lord told Moses to lead His people out of captivity into the land flowing with milk and honey. Pharaoh adamantly refused to let God's people go until his resistance was broken by the effects of God's power and might. Moses had led the Israelites through the sea and into the wilderness. Now, only three months into their journey (which will ultimately last 40 years,) the Lord God Almighty has offered a covenant to the people that if they will accept His commandments, *you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* And the people respond, *Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do* (see Ex. 19). But almost immediately disaster strikes and the anger of the Lord moves Him to destroy these people!

Now, how does Moses respond to God?

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt with great power

and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; so do change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. (Ex. 32:7-14.)

Did you notice the repetition?

Because of the intervention of Moses, a masterful, confident, Spirit-filled negotiator and advocate of the people, *the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.* How would you compare the manner in which these three biblical greats differ in their interaction with the Lord when disaster threatened?

Here's what some of the Rabbis and the Sages say:

Notice the intimacy of the robust dialogue between Moses and the Lord. And notice, too, the intimate tenderness of the Lord at the deathbed of Moses: *Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab at the mouth of the Lord. And the Lord buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, and no man has knowledge of the site of his burial-place until this day* (see Deut. 34.) And from the *midrash* (ancient Jewish storytelling traditions), this story is told:

The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to the soul of Moses, 'Depart now and I will take you up to the highest heaven of heavens, and I will set you under the throne of glory, next to the cherubim and seraphim.' And in that instant the Holy One, blessed be He, kissed Moses on the lips and took his soul with that kiss. *And at that the Holy Spirit wept and said, 'There has not arisen a prophet in Israel like unto Moses'* (Deut. 34.10). [*The Book of Legends*, #137]

10. We have met three great biblical personalities.

We have seen them in action. Their stories were part of the growing-up education of Jesus, a first-century Jewish man from the region of Galilee in Palestine/Israel. What would Jesus, fully human, fully Jewish, learn from these incidents in the lives of Noah, Abraham and Moses? These stories were invitations to him to have conversations with his Father. And this is also the Divine invitation to us: to have conversations with the Father based upon the scripture? To read, pray, study with the Bible. To interact with it, question it, interpret it, argue about its meaning for our lives today. And then, how will we respond? Rather passively, somewhat like Noah? A bit tentatively, somewhat like Abraham? Or very confidently, like Moses? Our church, our people, our civilization need our energy and our faith, our action! *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you*" (see Mt. 17:20).