



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Rethinking Noah's Ark

For many Catholics the Old Testament remains a closed book, an intimidating collection of ancient, obscure texts. For others it is a book of secondary importance, readily sidelined in favour of the Jesus stories of the New Testament. Yet the Catholic Church affirms both Testaments to be divinely inspired and core to the message of salvation. How then can we discover—or rediscover—the romance, vitality and sheer joy of opening the pages of the Old Testament?

For me, that rediscovery has begun through an awakening to traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture. Armed with none of today's powerful tools of historical-critical scholarship, the Jewish sages of old mined the scriptures for profound spiritual insights, using methods by which they skilfully probed, questioned, and even 'played' with the details of the text. Their powers of observation, language, imagination and storytelling yielded astonishing results. As stated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001:

"What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish

exegesis practised for more than 2000 years."¹

One of the joys of my current ministry, *Light of Torah* (lightoftorah.net), is being able to share something of these methods with parish groups; to see eyes widen with amazement as biblical texts come to life. For example, in one group we have just read the story of Noah's Ark. It seems that everyone is warmly approving of Noah whom the text describes as 'righteous,' 'blameless' (Gen. 6:9). What a shock, then, to discover the Jewish sages questioning Noah's virtue!

The question is put: why would the sages doubt Noah? In small havrutah groups (from the Hebrew: *haverim*, 'friends') we go back to the text, read and re-read, ponder and debate. "Ah! We overlooked that phrase." "So the text could be saying this..." "No way! Not if you take into account the following verse..." This is Torah study! Nothing like a hushed meditation circle. Rather, noisy, passionate, spirited engagement with the sacred text and the community gathered.

Soon enough, the penny drops: there is something terribly wrong with this story. 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 that is 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 the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33). How different to Moses who begs God not to destroy the Israelites after the Golden Calf episode (Exod. 32:7-14).

After an hour of Torah study, we come away marvelling at how sweet bible stories from childhood have turned into gripping reading and a source of healthy debate. Poor Noah may have taken a beating, but some are equally determined in his defence! Together we agree that the 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?

Catholics are called to read the Old Testament as the divine Word of God. And God's revelation is meant to engage us, captivate our hearts and draw us deeply into the story of salvation. The brilliance of the Jewish biblical tradition can do much to revitalize Catholics on that lifelong biblical journey. •

1. *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001). Quote is from the Preface by Cardinal Ratzinger.