

NOAH'S ARK

What it means for us

Julian Duckworth

The well known story of Noah's Ark can be enjoyed simply as an exciting adventure of a few people and animals who live through and survive a complete devastation. It has caught the imagination of many people and has been turned into drama and music. But in the first place, the story comes from the Bible, immediately raising it above the level of being just a good story. The other 'character' is God Himself, taking the main part in fact and leading those in the ark towards an eventual resting place and a completely new beginning.

What is this ancient story trying to say to us? Does its theme strike at the roots of our existence? Has it got ideas to help our management of the world today?

Immediately we can sense several underlying themes within the story. First there is the importance of continuity. The destruction in the form of a great flood destroys every living thing it sweeps over, except those few who ride safely on top of the waters, sealed up for the time being in an ark. They will form the potential of a brand new start.

There is also the familiar and universal symbol of peace and hope in the picture of the dove carrying an olive leaf, the first sign that the waters were beginning to subside and the end of the journey in sight. And there is the Divine promise, witnessed by a beautiful rainbow in the clouds that such a total catastrophe would never recur. The images are striking and colourful, and the themes run deep. We can develop their meaning from many angles. But to begin with, let us consider whether it could have possibly happened.

Was there a flood?

There have been quite a number of courageous expeditions to the slopes of Mount Ararat, to look for the remains of the ark and excitement has been felt occasionally by possible confirmations and aerial photographs showing outlines of boat-like shapes under icy glaciers. Geologists have discussed the conditions of the earth around 4000 B.C. and seem divided over the possibility of a total flood, a regional inundation, or no flood at all. It's true at least to say that in the area of the lower lying Middle East, severe flooding is not unheard of.

There is also the evidence of other ancient writings. Myths and legends from all cultures speak of a flood, or some similar devastation and in particular, those of the area in question, Mesopotamia, offer many strikingly similar parallels to the Genesis account in the Bible. Can so many accounts be more than a coincidence? Do they actually prove that there was a great flood once?

This century we have begun to study the contents of myths in a new light. No longer are they thought to be just the imaginative stories of a gifted poet or chronicler. They contain the essential heart of man's existence and try to express our common experience of life and the cycles which all of us go through. This is why we feel intuitively about ancient stories and myths, for they are spiritual and timeless. They are a fixed record of our inner activities.

It really doesn't matter all that much whether there was an actual flood or not. If we only focus our thought on that kind of puzzle, the usefulness of the tale will evade us completely. We should allow the story and all of its details to speak to our deeper understanding of life.

Ecology and Conservation

Many in the world fear such a final catastrophe as was the 'flood'. Industrial and urban man encroaches upon more of the world's natural areas, and uses up more of the world's resources as the years pass. Endangered species and disturbed ecological balances get increasing attention and publicity. Many of us

would dearly like to take what few are left of certain forms of life and put them in an ark ourselves, to put them beyond the reach of man's disregard, to preserve them.

Noah's Ark helps us to see the consequences of what we are doing to our physical world environment, how far unthinking destruction can go. At a very simple and obvious level it tells us to preserve intact what we have left, so that tomorrow's generations may enjoy the beauty of living things as we still can today.

And on that point, we must remember that the story isn't ultimately a tragedy. God both preserved each living thing safely and promised that this catastrophe wouldn't happen again. Two positive points: The power of nature to shield itself against harm, to even go into hiding is tremendous and all of us have seen for ourselves the wonderful way in which nature repopulates waste areas. Even dangerously contaminated areas are not totally lifeless. Perhaps the message is that we cannot finally destroy our environment, for it will reassert its living power, no matter how long that takes to happen.

And the second point has a present implication for us, too. We can learn from our near disasters and develop a keener awareness of our world's precious resources, so that we consciously guard against reaching such foolish levels again. Today's children are infinitely more familiar with the problem than those of a few decades ago. We are beginning to learn at last.

God gave his promise that such a thing as the flood would never happen again. How does He keep that promise and allow man to have freedom over his environment at the same time? One consideration is that man is provided with sufficient know how and new techniques to cope with situations as they arise for him.

Witness the alternative energy and food forms of recent years. Man can be a great problem solver as well as a great problem maker. Where is the source of his inspiration? Witness also how man keeps pace with his awareness of where things are heading, while he still has time to act. There are plenty of prophets around to spell out the truth. Who has enlightened them so well? God keeps his promises in subtle ways, no doubt!

Our inner spiritual conservation

The story of the Ark has a lesson for us about the care of the environment. But those outer beautiful forms we all love to see all have their counterparts within our own human psyche. Our inner world is equally in need of preservation and respect; more so in fact, for the quality of human life is ultimately of more importance than the material world. We pass on and leave our consciousness of this lovely world for ever to the care of those who follow and we enter a fully spiritual environment whose beauty is ordered and evidenced by the quality of the person we have become. It is this level of life which will always be with us.

Supremely, the Ark story deals with Divine involvement and care for the mind and spirit of man.

Let us move on now to look at the way that the story of Noah's Ark shows us a true picture of our spiritual preservation under Divine protection.

The Flood

We can all think of moments when angry feelings and reactions have come flooding into our mind, usually when we have been found out or not been able to get our own way. At such times, we are filled with countless thoughts which might include ideas to excuse ourselves, or lists of other peoples' far worse faults than our own. It is amazing how agile our mind becomes when it is stirred or challenged, especially when it feels under attack. We find ourselves swamped by these thoughts. Generally we don't enjoy being like this at all, we feel very guilty at being able to bring out such ideas and we become anxious at their repetition or their duration.

While such moments should not leave us in despair, they certainly tell us something important about ourselves. Human nature on its own, only looks after itself and its own safety. That thought is dismissed by many people who imagine it to be an invention to keep people in fearful obedience. But the extent of those moments brings home to us what we could be like if we gave free rein to these suggestions. The

Genesis account underwrites this truth, when we begin to apply it to ourselves, rather than merely historically.

'The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time'.

And to begin to try to do something about that situation, the Lord Himself sent a great flood. From our natural viewpoint and also in the way the Bible puts it, it appears that God was sorry for ever having made man in the first place. But the truth is that Divine Love always searches for ways to bring people into better states of life and this often involves allowing a full experience of our own ambitious drives, our self assertions and also our seeing the consequences of where these lead to, so that we may eventually feel deep horror at our potential destructiveness and be led back willingly to focus on love instead.

Noah and his family

If the picture was only black, there would be no hope. If we were nothing but evil, then life would become intolerable and even regrettable. Yet Noah and his family were good living people and from them, the Lord could repopulate the entire earth again. They were to be preserved, kept alive during the long period of the flood.

Every person has stored up within them the memory of love, especially that of childhood. A child couldn't remain alive if it had no love given to it or felt love. Even the child who is brought up in a sterile or hostile environment can at least see Love in other people or show love to a pet. Without this early form of love, which can find later development through teaching, moral education and example there would be nothing to touch our heart except the desire to live purely for ourselves.

This all important early love represented by Noah and his family, is our one great hope and the means by which we can remain in conscious touch with Divine Love, It can be used to form the growth point of a richer kind of life after the floods have subsided. A new realisation brought on during times of anguish can become the cornerstone of our life afterwards and direct most of our thinking.

The Ark

The theme of the 'Ark' is common in very many stories. What would Science fiction be without its spacecraft escaping from a doomed planet to find new and habitable worlds? Many stories contain the idea of a power preserved in secret until the coming of the right time. Think of the Arthurian legend of the sleeping knights for example. And throughout the course of the Bible's own evolving story, the 'ark' theme keeps on reappearing. In addition to Noah's Ark, there is the ark of the Covenant which carried within it the two tables of stone bearing the ten commandments. There is the ark which was placed in the bulrushes in which Moses was hidden away, later to become the leader of the Israelites. And when God Himself became Man, he was laid at His birth, in a manger. Finally in the vision of John, in the book of Revelation, we read of the book which was sealed up with the seven seals.

The common idea in all these is the preservation and safety of what is good, so that in time, it may come to serve great usefulness. At the human level this can only be achieved within the mind, with its capacity to learn, store, perceive and decide.

The structure of our mind and the way it grows, becomes a provision for our spiritual welfare. We aren't bound by the limitation of our faculties; rather they can become the means of our metamorphosis if we know them and use them.

Noah's Ark points out the true contents of our mind, as created by the Lord. A mind which can ride safely upon the rising waters, and remain separate from the fathoms of perilous waters beneath it. Our mind has the great and saving capacity to know that things are not as they seem to be. While we are striving with enormous difficulties which often appear terribly 'unfair', and while we feel no more than despondence, our mind at the same time is able to retain a clarity of vision which we know is the ideal we seek after, a picture of the truth as we would like it to be. And this becomes our preservation and stops us from being at the mercy of our senses.

Interestingly the story of Noah's Ark is placed in the 'infancy' of the human race, as the Bible describes it. The very young child doesn't yet have this ability to see life differently. He will react to life immediately, only from his own wishes and needs. But gradually his mind is opened, to see that he will have to wait and he learns of other considerations than his own. He can begin to learn about a way of living which he can't yet act upon but only have sown in his mind.

Noah's Ark is described as having rooms in it, and three levels or storeys. The rooms describe this separation in our mind of our Will, which is our inner drive, and our Understanding, which exists in complete separation, at least to begin with. Hopefully in time, those ideals which we understand will teach our will, so that the two become harmonious. This progression is pictured by the three storeys, which are three degrees of our understanding, our lowest sense impressions, our memory of knowledge and facts, and our highest level of a rational view point, with opinions and different awarenesses. At this top most storey, a window is built into the Ark, looking out above to the heavens. The window is opened later to let the dove and the raven fly out to spy out the condition of the waters, but during the confinement of those in the Ark, it alone brings light within from above. The mind of man cannot create its own light, it can be the receiver of spiritual light shedding its rays from above, and lighting up what lives within.

Conclusion

And what lived within the Ark for the duration were Noah, his family and the animals and birds which God had commanded to be taken on board. A whole cross section of everything which had lived previously, before the deluge came. 'Two of every living thing'. Just enough to replenish the earth anew, when the waters subside. Although the flood wipes out what was evil in man's life, there is to be no destruction of any of man's faculties, his thoughts (the birds) and his affections (the animals) are to be preserved intact, each to multiply and fill the earth (the mind) when the flood recedes. The new kind of life beginning on the virgin and strangely silent dry earth is to be complete and fruitful and built on the full light of heaven, which only begins as a ray of light through a high up window.

The following are extracts from Swedenborg's 'New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine'.
The numbers refer to paragraphs.

187. Only people who are being regenerated experience spiritual crises, because spiritual crises are times of mental anguish for people whose lives are devoted to goodness and truth. These crises are brought about by evil spirits. When they stir up the evils in us, an anxiety wells up inside that is a symptom of our spiritual crisis. We are not aware, however, of where the anxiety is coming from because we do not realize that a spiritual crisis is its source.

188. There are evil spirits and good spirits with each of us. The evil spirits are in our evil tendencies and the good spirits are in our good tendencies. When the evil spirits come closer they stir up our evil tendencies, and the good spirits respond by stirring up our good ones. This leads to a collision and a battle that causes us the inner anxiety that is a crisis of the spirit.

We can see from this that spiritual crises are caused by hell and do not come from heaven. This is also what is taught by the faith of the church, which is that God does not test anyone.

189. There are also times of inner anxiety for people whose lives are not devoted to goodness and truth. Theirs are earthly anxieties, though, not spiritual ones. The distinction is that earthly anxieties focus on worldly concerns, while spiritual anxieties focus on heavenly ones.

249. Without revelation from the Divine, we cannot know anything about eternal life or even about God, and even less about love for God and faith in God. This is because we are born into utter ignorance and have to learn from worldly sources everything that gives form to our understanding. It is also because by heredity we are born with evils of every kind, which come from love for ourselves and for the world. These loves give rise to pleasures that retain constant control over us and prompt us to think things that are

diametrically opposed to the Divine. This, then, is why we know nothing about eternal life; so there must of necessity be some revelation that makes it possible for us to know.

251. So since we live after death and our life after death is eternal, and since the particular life that lies ahead for us is based on the state of our love and faith, it follows that the Divine, out of love for the whole human race, has revealed the kinds of things that will guide us toward that life and be beneficial to our salvation.

In the Christian world, what the Divine has revealed for us is the Word.

252. Since the Word is a revelation from the Divine, it is divine in every detail. This is because whatever comes from the Divine cannot be otherwise.

Whatever comes from the Divine comes down to us through the heavens, so in the heavens it is adapted to the wisdom of the angels who live there, and on earth it is adapted to the grasp of the people who live here. Consequently, the Word has an inner meaning, which is spiritual and intended for angels, and an outer meaning, which is earthly and intended for us. For this reason it is the Word that joins heaven and us together.