

Noah's Lark
by
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Although considered by many to be the holy word of God, the Bible is really an unoriginal, contradictory, morally suspect, fantastically implausible book which lacks external support for many of its claims. In order to support these assertions, I will use the Biblical flood story as a concise exemplar of these problems and refer to other sections of the Bible in order to show how these problems are present throughout the Bible.

First, many Biblical stories and claims are neither originally Biblical nor unique. The ark story, for example, is based on several earlier stories. There is very strong evidence, based on literary and other considerations, that the flood story is originally a Mesopotamian, rather than Hebrew, story (Cheyne & Black, 1914; Sarna, 1966). First, Palestinian topography and climate make a flood unlikely. Second, the Hebrews were not skilled seafarers; thus, the detailed description of the ark is unlikely to be based on a Hebrew prototype.

Just as the Flood story is not unique, neither are other Biblical stories. For example, Jesus was not the only person to be considered to be the savior of mankind, nor are many of the details establishing his divinity unique (Graves, 1875). Indeed, as Robertson says, "There is not a conception associated with Christ that is not common to some or all of the Savior cults of antiquity" (Robertson, 1966, p. 52).

Second, the Bible is a composite document drawn from many sources. There are, for instance, actually two, somewhat contradictory, interwoven flood stories in the Bible. One of these stories, called P, was probably written by an Aaronid priest before 587 BCE. The other story, called J, was written near the court of king Rehoboam of Judah around 950 BCE (Rosenberg & Bloom, 1990). These stories consistently differ in their details. For example, they differ on the number of animals that Noah was instructed to bring aboard: in P, Noah is instructed to bring a pair of each animal aboard; in J, Noah is instructed to bring seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals. Second, they differ on the length of the flood: in P, it lasts 40 days and nights; in J it lasts for a little over a year (370 days). Third, in P, Noah sends out a raven; in J, he sends out a dove. The stories also differ on a number of other details, such as when everyone enters the ark, and how long they stay in the ark. Most importantly, the two stories use different names for, and ascribe different attributes to, their deity. P's deity is God, and is the transcendent controller of the universe. J's deity is Yahweh, a rather anthropomorphic deity who has regrets, who personally closes the door of the ark, and who later smells Noah's sacrifice (Friedman, 1987). These stories were later combined by an Aaronid priest living during the days of the second temple (circa 537 BCE).

Now, the Flood story is not the only composite document in the Bible. The majority of the Jewish Torah is an integration of several distinct sources. For instance, there are two creation myths, differing on numerous details. For example, they differ on the order of the creation of Adam, Eve, and the other animals: Adam and Eve were created at the same time (Genesis 1:27) and at different times (Genesis 2: 7; 2: 21, 22). Furthermore, Adam was created before the other animals (2: 18–20) and after the other animals

(Genesis 1: 24–27). The gospels are also composite documents, offering somewhat contradictory information about Jesus. It seems that the synoptic gospels drew many of their stories about Jesus from a common source book called Q, which is now lost. The gospels differ on many details, such as whether Jesus said that he was the Messiah or not, whether he carried his own cross or not, and on numerous details of chronology. There are numerous other contradictions throughout the Bible (Meritt, 1992).

Third, many Biblical stories are fantastically implausible. Consider, for instance, the amount of water that was supposed to have fallen during the Flood. The Bible says that water covered the highest mountains. As Paulos (1988) points out, this is more than half a billion cubic miles of liquid. Additionally, simple math will show that since it was supposed to have rained for 40 days and nights, or 960 hours, the rain must have fallen at a rate of over 30 feet per hour. At this rate, the rain would have sunk aircraft carriers, which are twice as long and three times as wide as the ark, much less an ark filled with animals!

About those animals: Let us take the minimum number of animals that Noah was told to bring on the ark: two of each kind. Someone in the Biblical era may, perhaps, be excused for believing that every species could fit into the ark; now that we have a better appreciation for the great diversity of fauna, this belief is inexcusable. It is impossible that the number of necessary species could have been assembled, stored, and fed in the ark described. Noah would, for example, have had to store and feed animals as diverse as the Tyrannosaurus Rex and the giant whale shark. Speaking of the whale shark, the Bible doesn't mention any aquatic animals, but they would have had to be stored; otherwise, they would have perished because of the changes in salinity in the waters around the globe. Furthermore, the animals would have to be stored in special environments, protected from their predators, and fed specific diets the entire journey. Even if we assume that they were literally packed into the ark, and not allowed to roam, each animal would still only get a space about two feet on each side (Dionisio, 1998; Isaak, 1995).

Fourth, we have no independent evidence for many Biblical claims, including that of a universal deluge. Earlier this century, an archaeologist named Leonard Woolley found what he believed to be evidence of a worldwide flood while excavating Ur. Later investigations have revealed that the flood was a local one, probably not even disrupting community life in the region (Ellison, 1986; Keller, 1980). There is no geological evidence for a universal deluge in recent history. Nor is there any evidence that humans went through a genetic bottle-neck about 5000 years ago. Not surprisingly, and despite numerous claims to the contrary, we also have no reliable evidence of the existence of the ark (Bailey, 1978).

Fifth, the Bible is also morally suspect. In the context of the flood story, we need to consider why God decided to destroy the earth: people were corrupt and lawless. So, God decided to destroy the earth, and all living things, and save a moderately righteous person (Plaut, 1974). Compare this with God's acceptance of the actions of another moderately righteous person: Lot. While most people know the story of the faithfulness of Lot, compared with his wife who was turned into a pillar of salt, most people are not told about some of the accepted actions of this righteous man. To protect his angelic visitors from the crowd that wanted to rape them, Lot offered his two virgin daughters, saying, "I have two daughters which have not known man, let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do to them as is good in your eyes; only unto these men do nothing" (Genesis

19: 8). Immediately after this, the men banging on Lot's door were blinded and the angelic visitors told Lot that he must leave the city because God would destroy it. Lest anyone think this is an isolated event, the same thing happens in Judges 19:23. There are numerous other morally suspect commands given by God throughout the Bible (Burke, 1983). For example, in a scenario reminiscent to that in Serbia, when the Israelites were fighting with the Midianites, God told the Israelites to kill all the men, and the women who had had sex, but to keep the virgins for themselves (Numbers 31: 17, 18). Furthermore, often the Bible does not present a consistent moral viewpoint and has been used on both sides of debates throughout history, from women's rights to slavery, and "even the devil can cite scripture for his purpose" (Hill & Cheadle, 1996).

As an additional consideration against those who wish to argue that a particular translation (e.g., the King James Version) is itself divinely inspired, we need to consider how we have copies of the Bible. For over a thousand years, scribes produced copies of the Bible by hand. At times, these scribes would alter what they were copying. These alterations could be due to errors in hearing what was said, errors due to reading what was written, or errors due to inserting parenthetical comments into the text that were really marginal notes. The alterations could also be due to scribes trying to fix what they perceived to be errors in the text that they were copying from (Metzger, 1992). On any account, we have many different texts of the Bible. The Bible also contains a number of unknown words, including the word for the type of wood used for the ark. Gopher wood, the standard translation, is really just a transliteration of the Hebrew. There have been many unsuccessful attempts to identify this type of wood. The Greek text, incidentally, refers merely to trimmed, as opposed to rough, lumber with the ark built from the former (Wevers, 1993). Granting that the ark was made of wood introduces a new problem. It is difficult to keep a large wooden ship seaworthy. The largest modern wooden ships are about 300 feet long, and, even when reinforced with iron, still leak constantly (Isaak, 1998).

All the above difficulties apply to a greater or lesser degree to most of the Bible. Perhaps there is a kernel of truth to most of the stories; perhaps there are golden nuggets of wisdom scattered though out the Bible. Perhaps. We must decide, however, whether the benefits outweigh the excavation costs, or whether it would be more beneficial to begin anew with reality as the foundation and reason as the guide.

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