

## **Bible Promises: November 19: The New Start Promise to Noah: Genesis 8: 20-23 and Genesis 9: 1-17**

The story of Noah's Ark is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, not least among those who have never opened a Bible. Some children may know more about Noah than they know about Jesus. You might like to test out on friends and neighbours "What do you know about Noah's Ark?" This isn't meant to be an exploration of the whole Noah story, but it is worth noticing that, just as Genesis in its current entirety is clearly a collection of narratives of various ages put together during the Exile, the Noah story is a (rather uneasy) combination of two different narratives: two different names for God; two different versions of the numbers of animals; two different durations of the flood; two different explanations for the flood; etc. (It seems to me that this very obvious inconsistency speaks powerfully for Genesis being an honest book. If it were simply propaganda, it would have been tidied up.)

There are a number of ancient Flood narratives – principally from areas of the world where flooding was still a normal experience – specifically Mesopotamia, which literally means "between the rivers" (Tigris and Euphrates). There may be a common folk memory of the several ancient floods that followed the end of the Ice Ages. The Noah story looks like a Jewish re-write of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic. The value and the relevance of Genesis in general and Noah in particular does not depend on "historical accuracy". What we have is devout people, centuries later, seeking to account for God's relationship with human-kind. I suspect that if the Genesis writers had been offered today's best archaeological guesses, they would have said "Thank you, but we want to concentrate on WHY, not WHAT and WHEN and HOW".

The challenge with the Noah promises is to avoid seeing/hearing what you want to see/hear. For example, given that Adam and Eve were apparently vegetarians in a world without exploitation of other creatures and without fear, while the post-Flood world incorporates meat eating and fear, the vegetarians (more accurately, vegans) can be forgiven for thinking that God prefers their way. Another example: the guarantee of seed time and harvest can be seen as conditional on continuing good behaviour. So crop failures and famine must be down to the bad behaviour of those whose crops have failed? In reality, famine is often inflicted on some people by other people; and is sometimes not credibly blamed on any human sins of omission or commission.

Not quite within scope But an even better example of misuse of the Bible (and of odd editing) is in the very next chapter of Genesis. Noah plants a vineyard, harvests the grapes, gets drunk, goes to bed without his pyjamas, and is observed/abused by a family member. He then curses a family member, and promises slavery. This text was used to justify black slavery. You will notice that the names of the parties involved are a complete muddle; and it looks as if the writer/editor wanted to attack the Canaanites; and made a singularly lousy job of it.

The two Noah Promises prompt reflection on our relationship with the rest of creation. We could discuss what stewardship means where natural resources are concerned. Global warming will mean Flood for some.. maybe the Thames Barrier won't be enough. But the loss of insect life could point to a different sort of extinction disaster. The one man and his family emphasis ( we must all be descended from Noah!) should shout at us not to argue that global warming is a United Nations responsibility rather than an individual responsibility. (As well as being a rebuke to the nationalist revolt against the European Community, the UN, etc. "I live in Shirley mate. The rest of the world can go hang!)