

Noah: A Righteous Man?

The story of Noah's Ark (Genesis 6:9–11:32) is well known and loved by Christians from childhood. Yet how many of us have explored the character of Noah through a Jewish interpretative lens? Take for example, this verse:

“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God” (Gen.6:9).

A straight-forward verse complimenting Noah, right? Not so for the Jewish sages of old! Through centuries of Torah reflection employing traditional interpretative methods, we find a lively debate as to whether Noah's righteousness was all that it appeared to be. Pause to ponder this, revisiting Genesis 6:9 and its surrounding verses. Why do you think Noah's virtue might be called into question?

The sages were intrigued by the phrase 'in his age' and interpreted this qualification in diverse ways, some to Noah's credit and others to his discredit. E.g., Noah might have been blameless 'in his age,' but what a wicked age it was! If Noah had lived in a righteous age he would have appeared mediocre by comparison. Then again, argued others, it is very difficult to be righteous in the midst of wickedness, therefore Noah's efforts are all the more praiseworthy!

Noted, too, was how Noah's reaction was quite different to Abraham's response in the face of God's anger. Think about it: God has just told Noah 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 those 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 Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.18:16-33). And to Moses, who begs God not to destroy the Israelites after the Golden Calf episode (Exod. 32:7-14).

This ancient text confronts us with timeless questions. At what point does obedience cease to be a faith response and become 'blind obedience'? Do we relate to God as passive robots or as full-

blooded disciples willing to embrace the anguish and holy struggles of our world?

The sages probed the Hebrew text further, noting that while Noah walked 'with' God (6:9), Abraham walked 'before' God (17:1). In the Midrash (the creative storytelling traditions of Judaism), we hear the voice of Rabbi Yehudah who depicts Noah as sinking in the mire of a godless generation but with the desire to extricate himself.¹ Unable to do so, God comes to his aid saying, 'walk with me.' Abraham, by contrast, was stronger in virtue. Says Rashi,² "Noah needed support, but Abraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness by himself." Further, Abraham was charged with a divine mission to announce God's word to others; but Noah could save only himself. Noah's path was one of survival, Abraham's was a path of mission.

What is gained by such comparisons? If we find ourselves lulled into a one-eyed view of a bible story, the Jewish sages remind us that the word of God holds multiple layers of meaning, and calls for our active engagement. It is a holy task to bring our questions of faith—robust, surprising and challenging—to our reading of the sacred text. Which raises the question: are we Catholics too 'polite' with the bible? What do the sages teach us by their insistent questioning and lively debates? Bringing your own interpretative energies to bear upon this Scripture passage, what do you think: Was Noah a righteous man? What does it mean to be righteous?

1. Bereshit Rabbah.

2. Rashi: 11th C., France. Considered the greatest of Jewish Torah commentators. Quoted in Leibowitz, 63.

Sources: *Etz Hayim: Torah & Commentary* (New York: JPS, 2001); *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1989); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (New York, 2007).
Scripture: JPS

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