

# Chapter 5 – Noah and His Flood <sup>1</sup>

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by

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*Myths are metaphors that convey truth about the  
indescribable through powerful images and experiences.*

William P. Collins<sup>1</sup>

It seems that Noah came from a highly distinguished family said to be descended from Adam. According to the fifth chapter of Genesis, Adam lived 930 years, His son Seth 912, his son Enosh 905, his son Kenan (Cainan KJV) 910, his son Mahalalel 895, his son Jared 962, his son Enoch 365, his son Methuselah 969, his son Lamech 777, and his son Noah 950. *“He [Lamech] named him Noah and said, ‘He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.’”* (Gen. 5:29)

Much conjecture has been made about the long lives of the patriarchs. The Sumerian King List states that Sumerian kings descended from the heavens and gives the early kings longevities of thousands of years to extoll their greatness. Some scholars have drawn a parallel between this ancient custom and the supernumerary years given to the patriarchs of the generations of Adam. However, Shoghi Effendi noted, “The ages of the Prophets as specified in the Bible were based on a different calculation than the one used at present.”<sup>2</sup> He also commented: “The years of Noah are not years as we count them, and as our teachings do not state that this reference to years means His dispensation we cannot interpret it this way.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shared by author for posting at [bahai-library.com/maddocks\\_coming\\_glory](http://bahai-library.com/maddocks_coming_glory) ; click for links to purchase the complete book.

According to Genesis, Noah was a ninth-generation descendant of Adam and a great-grandson of Enoch, who was said to have walked with God but then was no more because God took him. (Gen. 5:24) Other than this genealogy, Genesis gives no markers as to when or where Noah lived. There are traditions, however, to the effect that this family retained divine knowledge passed down from Adam to his descendants that was above and beyond what He gave to the people. For example, the book of Enoch, one of the apocryphal books attributed to various Jewish writers from perhaps the third century BCE to the first century CE, was claimed to have been divinely revealed but it was excluded from the Hebrew canon. That book states that Enoch told his son Methuselah, the grandfather of Noah: *“And now, my son Methuselah, all these things I am recounting to thee and writing down for thee! and I have revealed to thee everything, and given thee books concerning all these: so preserve, my son Methuselah, the books from thy father’s hand, and (see) that thou deliver them to the generations of the world.”*<sup>4</sup>

Noah is best known for the flood that reputedly killed all humans and animals except those on the ark. Legends of global floods are common in many cultures, especially among people living in flood-prone areas such as river deltas. As with all alluvial plains, the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers experienced frequent floods, but archeological evidence shows that these floods were local and none of them converged for widespread flooding of the whole Mesopotamian area. However, distant memories of a catastrophic flood in the Middle East in about 5600 BCE could well have set the scene for Enlil’s flood in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Noah’s flood in Genesis.

## **The Historical Epic Flood**

Two geophysicists at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, William B. F. Ryan and Walter C. Pitman, published compelling scientific evidence for a catastrophic flood north of Mesopotamia in their book *Noah’s Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries about the Event That Changed History*. The authors conducted oceanographic explorations of the Black Sea using sound waves and coring devices to probe the sea floor. They obtained cores of lakebed sediment that contained clear evidence that this inland body of saltwater had once been a freshwater lake lying hundreds of feet below the level of the world’s rising oceans after the last Ice Age, the Pleistocene glaciation, that began about 1.5 million years ago and ended about 12,500 BCE. Massive amounts of water were locked up in glaciers at the height of the last Ice Age, when ocean levels were about four hundred feet lower than they are today, exposing much land that is now under water. Indeed, one could walk across land bridges from France to England, from Morocco to Spain, from Sicily to Italy, from New Guinea to Australia, and from

Siberia to Alaska. As the earth gradually warmed, the ice melted and ocean levels rose about 400 feet over several thousand years. Eventually, pressure from the rising Atlantic Ocean caused water to push violently through the Straights of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea. In turn, pressure in the Mediterranean pushed saltwater forcefully through the Aegean Sea and into the Sea of Marmara. But this massive surge of water did not stop there. It continued east across the Bosphorus ledge, a twenty-mile strip of land between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea in today's Turkey, gouging out a channel from 280 to 425 feet deep. The saltwater poured into the Black Sea—with the unimaginable force of two hundred Niagara Falls—flooding the beaches and filling the rivers, chasing all life before it. This force of pummeling water carved out the Bosphorus Strait that is now a significant waterway separating European Turkey from Asian Turkey and connecting the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea.

Ryan and Pitman used sophisticated dating techniques that confirmed the date of 5600 BCE for this catastrophic event. The freshwater Black Sea and the surrounding land had been an oasis of life for Neolithic farms and villages, but in the face of the flood, the people had to flee for their lives in all directions. The water level in the Black Sea rose several feet per day, eventually cresting at several hundred feet and submerging more than sixty thousand square miles of surrounding land, a thirty percent expansion in size. The foundations of Neolithic structures have been found on the lakebed.

The deafening roar of the water crashing through the Bosphorus must have been audible for miles. Within one year, the freshwater flora and fauna of the Black Sea were replaced by those in the saltwater pouring in from the Mediterranean Sea. The recognition of this swift change shattered the scientific belief that geological processes are always gradual. Ryan and Pitman gave a graphic depiction of this event and its legacy:

The flood myth lives on for a number of reasons. First, it is surely a true story of the permanent destruction of a land and its people and a culture suddenly and catastrophically inundated, of farmers uprooted from their hard-won fields, their villages permanently destroyed. They had to flee with what little they could carry, old and young, straggling along day after day. They had to flee and at the same time obtain food from the land by hunting and gathering, skills they had long forgotten. Some, perhaps many, probably died of exhaustion. For those who had lived near the Bosphorus at the western end of the lake, the sight and sound of the flume must have filled their hearts with terror and horror, “like the bellowing of a bull, like a wild ass screaming ... Earth shook, her foundations trembled, the sun darkened, lightning flashed, thunder pealed, and a deafening voice, the like of which was never heard before, rolled across mountain and plain.”\* So the tragedy was indelibly implanted in their oral history.

Over the thousands of years since with war, invasion, migrations, and other calamities, the legend disappeared from the folk memory of many. However, to those who fled to Mesopotamia and whose progeny are still there, the flood lived on for thousands of years, its telling and memory dramatically reinforced by the floods of the Tigris and Euphrates.<sup>5</sup>

\* Cited in R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myth: The Book of Genesis*, 1986, 112.

The memory of this epic flood might have been refreshed by the constant floods in the alluvial plains of the Tigris and Euphrates delta. It certainly presented a superb framework for a divine allegory.

### **Noah Sails His Ark**

The Genesis account of Noah's flood can be seen as the climax of a sequence that begins with the creation of the world and humanity, continues with the threat to eliminate humanity and start over with Noah's descendants, and concludes with the renewal of God's promise for human life in the first known covenant with the one God. Interestingly, Genesis represents God as one deity, not a pantheon, albeit an anthropomorphic deity who can change His mind. Since the prehistoric legends and traditions of the Jews were first written down in the middle of the last millennium BCE, it appears that the monotheism of Abraham and Moses was adopted in the flood story.

Some Jews and Christians believe in a literal interpretation of Noah and the flood, but there is no archeological or geological evidence for such an event. Others relegate it to the status of an enchanting Sunday school story with bucolic scenes of Noah leading the animals onto the ark two by two, Noah releasing the dove, and Noah receiving a new covenant with God signified by a rainbow. However, it appears that the Genesis account of Noah is a weighty discourse involving the coming of a Prophet of God; the rejection of His Revelation by most of the people; the new Covenant with God, or Ark of the Covenant, that provided a new level of spirituality for those who embraced it and spiritual loss for those who did not.

A word of caution is timely before delving further into the Bahá'í perspective about Noah. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "*All the texts and teachings of the holy Testaments have intrinsic spiritual meanings. They are not to be taken literally.*"<sup>6</sup> Referring to the Noah story, Shoghi Effendi wrote: "The Bahá'í Teachings state that the Ark and the flood were not actual physical events. Rather, the Ark is a symbol of the divine Covenant in every Age, and 'drowning' means

being occupied with the things of this world instead of the things of God. Concerning the biblical flood story, the Ark and Flood we believe are symbolical.”<sup>7</sup>

First, let’s note that the Genesis story of Noah follows events in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* closely enough that most scholars believe that it was derived from this epic poem. Indeed, Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, authors of *Old Testament Parallels*, commented that the stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah’s flood are parallel to the saga of Gilgamesh, which Endiku is parallel to Adam, Utnapishtim (who piloted the Gilgamesh’s boat) to Noah, and Dilmun, the land at the mouth of the rivers, to Eden.<sup>8</sup>

This borrowing does not, however, dilute the symbolic, spiritual significances found in both legends. We have no evidence that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was inspired by Adam’s Dispensation. However, the epic’s symbology, especially that of Enkidu finding his human self (see Chapter 3) and later searching for the meaning of his life and, unsuccessfully, the path to immortality (not covered in this book), portrays a spiritual journey. The poem relates how the survivors of the flood disembarked from their ark and offered food sacrifices to the gods, who had become famished during the humans’ absence. (See Chapter 3) The grateful gods now had a new appreciation for humans and offered a new covenant. The gods promised that they would never again try to wipe out humans, and humans agreed to continue serving the gods.

Genesis introduces us to Noah with commentary about His character: “*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.*” (6:9) Bahá’u’lláh used the example of Noah when speaking of the divine Luminaries and Their successive returns: “*For instance, consider that among the Prophets was Noah. When He was invested with the robe of Prophethood, and was moved by the Spirit of God to arise and proclaim His Cause, whoever believed in Him and acknowledged His Faith was endowed with the grace of a new life.*”<sup>9</sup> Before His calling, though, Noah seemed to have lived a life normal for His times as described by Bahá’u’lláh:

*Of him it could be truly said that he was reborn and revived, inasmuch as previous to his belief in God and his acceptance of His Manifestation, he had set his affections on the things of the world, such as attachment to earthly goods, to wife, children, food, drink, and the like, so much so that in the day-time and in the night season his one concern had been to amass riches and procure for himself the means of enjoyment and pleasure. Aside from these things, before his partaking of the reviving waters of faith, he had been so wedded to the traditions of his forefathers, and so passionately devoted to the observance of their customs and laws, that he would have preferred to suffer death rather than violate one letter of those superstitious forms and manners current amongst his people.*

*Even as the people have cried: "Verily we found our fathers with a faith, and verily, in their footsteps we follow."\*\*10*

\* Qur'án 43:22

After accepting His mission, though, Noah suffered so grievously at the hands of the unbelievers in His Revelation that He despaired and beseeched God to remove them. Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

*How frequently they denied Him, how malevolently they hinted their suspicion against Him! Thus it hath been revealed: "And as often as a company of His people passed by Him, they derided Him. To them He said: `Though ye scoff at us now, we will scoff at you hereafter even as ye scoff at us. In the end ye shall know.'"\* Long afterward, He several times promised victory to His companions and fixed the hour thereof. But when the hour struck, the divine promise was not fulfilled. This caused a few among the small number of His followers to turn away from Him, and to this testify the records of the best-known books. These you must certainly have perused; if not, undoubtedly you will. Finally, as stated in books and traditions, there remained with Him only forty or seventy-two of His followers. At last from the depth of His being He cried aloud: "Lord! Leave not upon the land a single dweller from among the unbelievers."\*\*11*

\* Qur'án 11:38

\*\* Qur'án 71:26

The Bahá'í Writings seem not to address the nature of Noah's mission or His teachings. We therefore examine the symbology.

Massive bodies of water can signify a new Revelation that sweeps away the old and acts as a cleansing: *"Praise and glory beseem the Lord of Names and the Creator of the heavens, He, the waves of Whose ocean of Revelation surge before the eyes of the peoples of the world."*<sup>12</sup>

An ark is a large boat that enables safe travel on the seas and can be a symbol for safety and security. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Genesis story of Noah both feature arks. Utnapishtim captained the ark of the great flood sent by the gods to destroy humanity and, in return, was granted immortality. Noah captained His ark to the end when God gave mankind the first recorded divine covenant, signified by a rainbow.

Each Dispensation presents a new covenant with God, an ark. A covenant is a binding agreement between God and man whereby God requires certain behavior of people and in return confers certain blessings. This covenant is amended and renewed with each new Revelation to reflect different circumstances and new expectations. The inhabitants of Noah's Ark were people

who accepted His Revelation and were sheltered in the Ark of His Covenant from the persecutions heaped upon them so that they could survive to teach this new faith. Noah's Ark settled on a mountain as the flood receded.

Mountains can symbolize God, constancy, eternity, and higher spirituality. Moses encountered God on a mountain: "*The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.*" Exod. 19:20). Elijah heard the still-small voice of God while standing on a mountain: "*And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.*" (1 Kings 19:11–12, KJV) The author of Psalm 36 compared the righteousness of God with the highest mountains: "*Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep.*" Psalm 36:6). Jesus experienced the Transfiguration on a mountain: "*After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them.*" (Matt. 17:1–2)

When Noah's people disembarked, they erected an altar to God and sacrificed animals and birds as burnt offerings. The aroma was pleasing to the Lord, who said to Noah and His sons:

*"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."* (Gen: 9:9–16)

Another source of information about the symbolic meanings of the Ark is found in a glossary compiled for *Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986*:

The word "ark" means, literally, a boat or ship, something that affords protection and safety, or a chest or box. It is used in two senses in the Bible. In the first sense it refers to the Ark of Noah, which He was bidden to build of gopher wood to preserve life during the Flood. In the second sense it refers to the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred chest representing to the Hebrews God's presence among them. It was constructed to hold the Tablets of the Law in Moses' time and was later placed in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Ark, as a symbol of God's Law and the Divine Covenant that is the salvation of the people in every age and Dispensation, appears in various ways in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh refers to His faithful followers as "the denizens of the Crimson Ark"; He refers to the Ark of the Cause and also to the Ark of His Laws. A well-known passage in which this term is used appears in the Tablet of Carmel: "Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Baha who have been mentioned in the Book of Names."\*<sup>13</sup>

\* The Tablet of Carmel, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 4–5.

It is possible that there are symbolic meanings for the numbers of days that are given for events and passages of time during the voyage of Noah's Ark. For this endeavor the method of biblical counting of a year for a day would be used: "*For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you,*" (Num. 14:34) and "*I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the people of Israel.*" (Ezek. 4:5) In biblical counting, one year equals 360 days.

Many have pondered the numbers of days/years associated with the voyage of Noah's ark because numbers are timeless and not easily mistranslated. Don Dainty, a Canadian Bahá'í researcher, studied Noah's flood and set forth his personal interpretation. (See Appendix C)

### **The Tower of Babel – another significant allegory**

Immediately following the Noah epic and a genealogy of Noah's descendants, Genesis 11:1–9 presents the story of the tower of Babel, which is not only a timeless tale in its lessons but also seems to be especially pertinent today.

According to Genesis, the whole world had one language when people moved to the plain of Shinar (Mesopotamia). They started building a city with a tower that would reach to the heavens so that they could make a name for themselves and avoid being scattered over the face of the earth.

*But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel\*—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 1:5–7)*

\* NIV Bible Note: That is, Babylon; Babel sounds like the Hebrew for confused.

And so it happened that many languages replaced the one language and the people were scattered over the face of the earth.

In both Persian and Akkadian, the word *báb* meant gate, and in Hebrew the word *El* meant "God" as in Bethel (house of God). Therefore, the name Babel meant the Gate of God. In Akkadian, *ilu* meant god, so Babel translated to Babylon.<sup>14</sup> The building of Babel, the gate of God, represented an attempt to circumvent God—to turn away from God—in attaining material greatness of might and power that could be imposed on the people and enslave them. As portrayed here, God has a sense of humor. He gave the city a name that would be a divine pun by substituting a similar-sounding word to enshrine the confusion of the language, which stopped the construction. Instead of establishing a city called, in Akkadian, the "Gate of God," it is now known by the Hebrew word Babel, from *balal*, meaning "to mix, mingle, confound, confuse."<sup>15</sup>

Nimrod was the great-grandson of Noah through Ham, who had not recognized his father's station (see chapter 6) and was associated with Babylon and other cities in Mesopotamia. (10:6–10) Therefore, the tower of Babel is about people who do not recognize the Prophets and, rather, create their own version of heaven in materialistic terms.

The Babel story seems to be a corollary to the protection from humanity that was given to the tree of life, with "*cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*" (3:24) As explained in Chapter 4, Jesus brought the fruits of this tree into His ministry. The tree of life is also understood as the station of the Universal Manifestation of the universal cycle, who is Bahá'u'lláh and who referred to Himself as the tree of life.

There would be no shortcuts, and to a certain extent humanity would have to be protected from itself. The fruits of the tree of life would be extended progressively, in God's good time. And God's time for the inauguration of the Cycle of Fulfillment was 1844, when the Báb, the Gate of God, appeared as the Prophet-Founder of the Bábí Faith and the first of the Prophet-

Founders of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh called for the eventual selection of one of the world's languages as an auxiliary language to be globally taught. When this happens, humanity will have one common language in addition to innumerable mother tongues.

Wade Fransson, a Bahá'í researcher, perceived that Babel was humanity's aborted attempt to ascend to heaven on its own terms "apart from submission to God, to appropriate the name 'the Gate of God,' which God had in fact reserved for another time.... God chose to call it what it was—confusion—and in confusing the language, to thwart the clarity of purpose, the power of their unity, which was being put to an evil purpose."<sup>16</sup> The result today is a

"system of profit-driven materialism that is ultimately posing a threat to civilization and destroying the planet in the process. Its defenders praise this system for its ability to create the jobs, wealth, goods, and services that we all crave. But this system exists in a symbiotic relationship with humankind, in our role as caretakers of the planet; we are in a codependent, materialistic death embrace."<sup>17</sup>

## Chapter 5: Noah and His Flood, NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William P. Collins, "Sacred Mythology and the Bahá'í Faith," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 2:4, 1990, 1. Collins served on the Editorial Board of the *Bahá'í Studies Review*. He is the author of *Bibliography of English Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, 1844–1985* (George Ronald Publisher, 1990) and many articles about Bahá'í history and beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> "Ages of Adam, Seth, Methuselah and Noah," from a memorandum dated May 7, 2009, prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre at the request of the Universal House of Justice.

<sup>3</sup> From a letter dated November 25, 1950, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1659, 495.

<sup>4</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, Chapter LXXXII, no. 1. The book of Enoch is included in the canons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, but not by any other Christian groups. The Beta Israel Jews in northern and northwestern Ethiopia are the only Jews who include it in the Hebrew canon.

<sup>5</sup> William B. F. Ryan and David C. Pitman, *Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries about the Event that Changed History*, 251–52. Ryan and Pitman are senior scientists at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University (LDEO) and recipients of the Francis P. Shepard medal for marine geology from the Society for Sedimentary Geology. Ryan is a Doherty Senior Scholar in marine geology and geophysics and a special research scientist in biology paleoenvironment at LDEO, and an adjunct professor at Columbia University for earth and environmental sciences. Pitman is a senior scientist emeritus at LDEO and a fellow of both the Geological Society of America and the American Geophysical Union, which awarded him its Maurice Ewing Medal (1996). He also received the Alexander Agassiz Medal of the National Academy of Sciences (1998).

<sup>6</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 459–60.

<sup>7</sup> *Bahá'í News*, No. 228, February 1950, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, no. 162, 142.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 162, 142–43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 7, 7–8.

<sup>12</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, “Tarazát” (“Ornaments”), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Glossary of Bahá'í Terms*. From the glossary in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986: Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, the Universal House of Justice.

<sup>14</sup> The word Babylon is derived from Akkadian bab (gate) plus ilu (god). John L. MacKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*. (New York: Touchstone, 1965), s.v. “Tower of Babel.”

<sup>15</sup> The NAS Old Hebrew Lexicon, s.v. “Balal,”

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/balal.html>

<sup>16</sup> Wade Fransson, *The Rod of Iron*, 106–07.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.