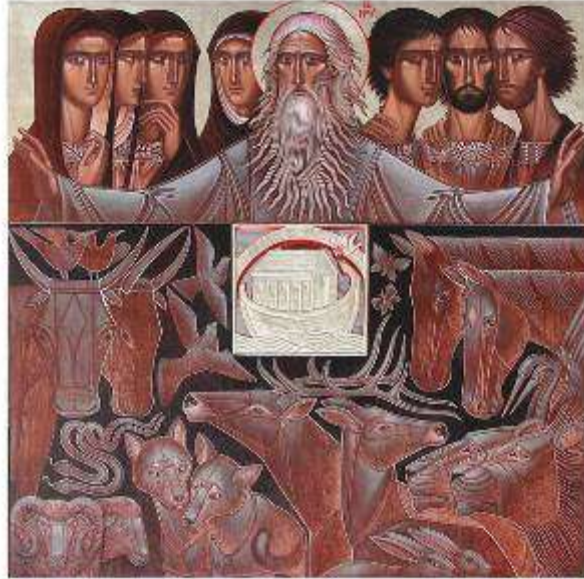


*In the Beginning:  
Art from the Book of Genesis*

**Noah and the Flood**  
(Genesis 6:9–9:17)



BY JOHN HENRY (CONTEMPORARY, 1977), COURTESY

**Genesis 6:9–9:17**

6 <sup>11</sup> Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. <sup>12</sup> God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. <sup>13</sup> So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. <sup>14</sup> So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. <sup>15</sup> This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. <sup>16</sup> Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. <sup>17</sup> I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. <sup>18</sup> But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. <sup>19</sup> You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. <sup>20</sup> Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. <sup>21</sup> You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.” <sup>22</sup> Noah did everything just as God commanded him....

9 <sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup> “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” <sup>12</sup> And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

## Reflection

There are lots of children's stories, and children's pictures and songs, about Noah's ark. Yet anyone who has actually read Genesis 7-9 knows that the story of Noah and the ark is anything but a children's story. Children's bibles and toys see a big boat and parade of animals, but the biblical story is the story of the great flood that wiped out nearly every living thing from the face of the earth. Not the kind of thing to read to a child before bedtime!

The story arguably starts way before the flood, at the beginning with a creative God who made a world and pronounced it "Good, very good." And yet, in just a few chapters the world has gone from good to bad because of human sinfulness. Our original forebears, Adam and Eve, were set in a lush garden with only one prohibition: stay off that tree over there. But the minute God's back was turned, they both ate of the fruit in rebellion against God. Then the next generation brought the first murder, fratricide, into the world. Rebellion continued unabated until God had had it with the human race. Then come those awful, sad words: "The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth" (Gen 6:5-6).

God decided to end the human experiment and blot humanity off the face of the earth. In all of the world, only one man and his family was "righteous" and "blameless"—Noah. God warned Noah of the coming destruction, told him to build an "ark" to save a remnant of the animals and his family. And then, as we used to sing at camp, "the rains came down and the floods came up," and every living thing that was not on the ark perished. Only Noah and his family were saved in order that the human experiment could continue.

However, that experiment continues to have mixed results. In an odd but somehow all too real episode, once they are off the ark, Noah makes some wine, gets drunk and naked, and is seen, in his nakedness, by his children. (I take this as a metaphor for any parent whose moral flaws are exposed before one's children.) Noah may be a righteous man, but he is still human, with all the flaws of any human being. As the Danish Christian Soren Kierkegaard noted, "sin presupposes itself" into human life.

It doesn't take long for the same flawed, human proclivity to rebel, to mess up, to be stupid, to come to the fore once again in the human story. First Adam and Eve, then Cain and Abel, then Noah, and then . . . you and me. We come to church, we the righteous remnant gathered (one of the earliest symbols for the church was an ark), but then the service ends and we go forth. Some of us will engage in deceit, some will take things that don't belong to us, or lust in the heart and in body, covet and dishonor, and some of it will be seen by our children. In short, we sin.

To the rest of the world, to admit this is very odd, atavistic, self-abusive even. To a lot of people, our attention to evil, sin, and guilt can only lead us to "negative thinking"; it creates a "bad self-image;" it's such a backward, psychologically harmful way to think. We live in an age that believes not in the reality of sin, but in the need to go along in order to get along: Who am I to judge? We're all doing the best we can. Why must the church dredge up this sordid story of our ill-fated, misbehaving ancestors?

Why? Because the church is not only about reconciliation, love and comfort. It is also about the truth. And this ancient story tells the truth about how we got to where we are today. We have been wrong, from the start, from the very first, and it continues today. Read this morning's newspaper, check out a book on the history of the past century, and you'll quickly be overwhelmed by so much death, so much chaotic destruction, not by water, not through the punishment of God, but by our own wickedness.

The story does not end there, though, with us left with our terrible sin and God's terrible judgment. The last word will not be our sin, but rather the Creator's awesome love. By the grace of God, the waters abate, the clouds recede, the sun comes out, and a rainbow arches over the whole sodden mess. Humanity is forgiven, the human experiment begins again, and God promises "never again." Never again will He cause a flood to wipe out humanity. Never again will God give up on humanity. Never again will He make such sweeping judgment against us, though we deserve it. And just to make sure that God doesn't forget that promise, God puts a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of the covenant.

And so this terrible story ends in good news, because God is determined to have the last word in our story. Our sin, humanity's chaotic wickedness that made such a mess of the good world, this is not the last word. God continues the conversation. He resumes the story with each of us.

It is through baptism that we ourselves enter that story. In baptism, we recapitulate—we replay—the flood and the rainbow: in our baptism our old, sinful self is submerged, drowned, so that our new self might arise. That's what Paul says of baptism. Just as in the great flood, when water washed away a terrible past and made possible a bright future, in our baptism God pronounces judgment on our wickedness and mercy on our future.

The Reformer Martin Luther once said something to the effect that baptism takes only a few moments to do, but your whole life to finish. This is a profound truth. We have to keep dying to our old, mistaken past so that we might arise to a new future. Indeed, when St. Paul spoke of his conversion to Christ, he knew not whether to speak of it as being killed or being born; it felt like both at the same time. In order for us to come to God, to be with God, something must die in us so that something might be born, something must end in order that there might be a new beginning.

We have just entered the season of Lent, a season of "preparation," of getting our hearts ready to receive with joy the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection. Through self-examination and repentance, we are invited to once again embrace the mystery of a God who both judges us and loves us at the same time. It is a time to ask, What needs to be washed away from your life right now? What bad habit, sinful inclination, or dark secret needs to be drowned? And what sun needs to shine, what good work needs to be undertaken, what new practice needs to be ventured? If those are not questions that came to your mind that Sunday, the invitation stands.

Make no mistake, our sin is serious. Our alienation from God is severe. Storm clouds gather and waters rise. Yet the goodness and grace of God is over it all—over us all, over humanity in its heights and depths, over the valleys and peaks of your life, a rainbow over us reminding us of God's promise.

## Artistic Illumination



*Dove Returns to Ark*, in Jacob van Maerlant's *Spieghel Historiae*, West Flanders; c1325-1335



*Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, Kingdom of Jerusalem (Acre) before 1291



**Les Histories Roger, in Histoire Ancienne Jusqu'à César, French, dated to the 13th century**

Noah's ark is here portrayed as a ship, flanked on its two ends by figureheads that resemble a bear and leopard. This embellishment has of course no basis in the biblical text but it may attest to the maritime world with which the artist was familiar. The ship is divided into two main parts. The bottom part served as housing for the animals, and the upper level as a section for human beings, intended for Noah and his family. Interestingly, while the animals are in a sealed windowless area, the space serving the humans has many windows, possibly only for artistic reasons. According to the text, the ark had three levels and the artist appears to have housed the fowls in the green roof that forms the third level. On the left of the painting are animals entering the ark – horses, camels, deer, and a lion. Above these mammals a light-colored unicorn can be clearly identified (although not white as in most paintings). The unicorn is characterized by a thickened horn on its forehead. One assumes that the unicorn must have been stopped by bouncers at the door, because he didn't make it to the other side of the flood!



***The Entry into the Ark (c.1270-80), inserted in 14th-century Psalter (English)***

Notice here a similar multi-tier conception as above.



*Noah's Ark*, page from an Illuminated Manuscript, unknown artist, English, East Anglia, c1480–90

Image shows the ark, half-submerged, as the raven flies to dry land



Mosaic, Cathedral of the Assumption, Monreale, Sicily, 12th-13th century

## Animals on Parade

The most identifiable and most popular aspect of the story of Noah and the Flood, the feature that has captured the imagination of artists throughout the ages is, the animal menagerie aboard the ark. The command to Noah to gather up pairs of every animal, wild and domesticated, has provided artists with the opportunity to display their artistic creativity and skill in depicting a parade of every animal known to them, including at times fantastical beasts (as noted above). The display of animals became a favorite in the last two centuries, which coincided with the increased opportunity among middle class Europeans to see never-before-seen animals at public zoos.



Charles Wysocki (American, 1928–2002), *Noah and Friends*, 1995



Herbert Mandel (American, 1925–2016), *Noah Disembarks*, 1982



**Chris Hiatt (British), *The Gathering***

The parade of animals has in the last century lent itself to softening of the story of the Flood so as to make it palatable to children. This development was reinforced by illustrations of animals in children's bibles.



**Zac Kinkade (American, 1992-), *Noah's Ark*, 2015**

Zac Kincaid is nephew to well-known painter, Thomas Kinkade, whose influence on Zac is evident in the use of glowing highlights and pastel colors in highly idealized scenes. This is perfectly fitting with the larger trend of making Noah and the Ark into a children's story.



## Cataclysm turned Children's Cartoon



**Barbara Reid (Canadian, 1957-), *Two by Two*, 1992**

Illustration for children's book



**Bill Bell, *Two by Two***

Cut-away view of the ark with cartoonish animals is available as a 48-piece puzzle



**James Ng (Chinese), *Noah's Ark*, contemporary**

Perhaps the epitome of the palliating the horror of the Noah and Ark story is this illustration by Chinese artist Ng's Disney-fied cartoon of the animals disembarking from the ark.

**Noah Releases a Raven (and a dove) from The  
Holkham Bible, English, 14th century**



In contrast to the cartoon depictions of the Flood, the following pieces remind us of the human tragedy that was the Flood. While the victims were far from innocent, that fact does not take away from the horror of the near extinction of all non-aquatic life on the planet.

This awareness is displayed in these pieces through the presence of corpses in the water beneath the ark.

**Psalter of St Louis & Blanche de Castille  
(French, 1225-1235)**

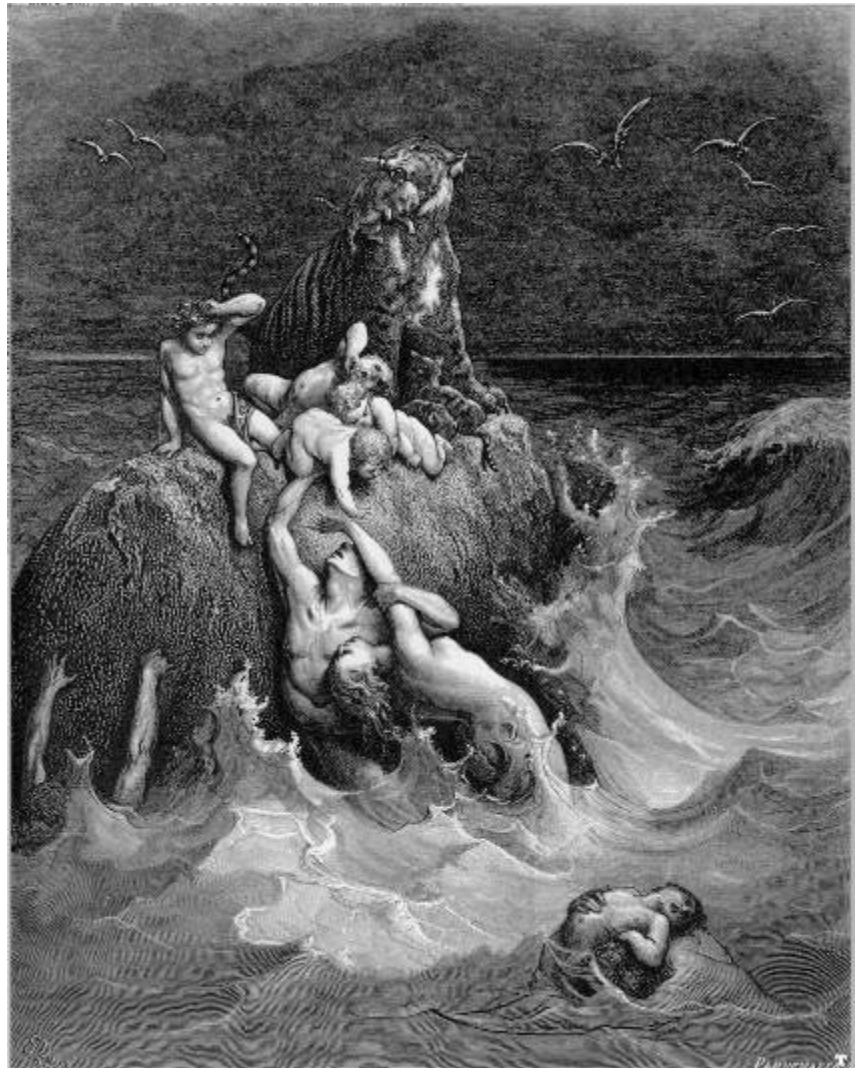




Miniature of the Master of the Échevinage. St Augustine, *The City of God*. Rouen, France, 3rd quarter of the 15th century

The piece above from Échevinage shows the destruction wrought by the Flood in the floating detritus, the flotsam and jetsam of human and animal life.

Below, and in the following depictions, the pathos and tragedy of the Flood is highlighted in the survivors' attempt to escape the waters.



Gustave Doré (French), *The Deluge*, illustration by from the 1865 *La Sainte Bible*

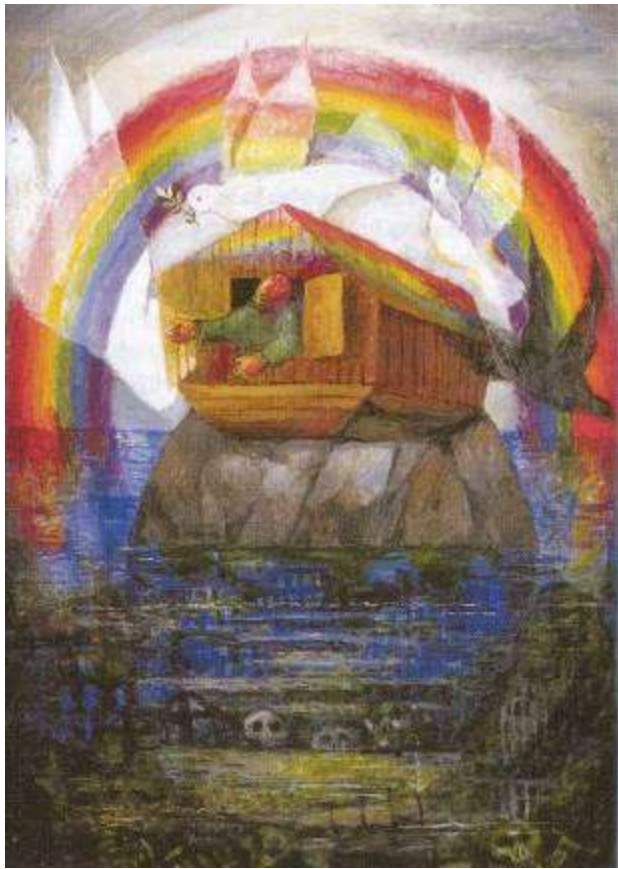


Agostino Carracci (or Caracci) (1557 – 1602), *The Deluge*, 1616-18

Joseph-Désiré Court (French, 1797-1865), *The Deluge*, 1827

This Deluge scene by Court interprets the human disarray of those condemned by the judgment of God who set off the deluge on earth. He saved only Noah, his family and one couple of each animal race. This painting shows a certain criticism of the judgment of God by showing among the condemned a child, a woman, an old man, as well as a young man trying to save his family. While the scene strikes at our hearts, we trust that the judgment of God is just and that the wickedness of humanity had indeed gotten out of control and that no one was innocent of it.





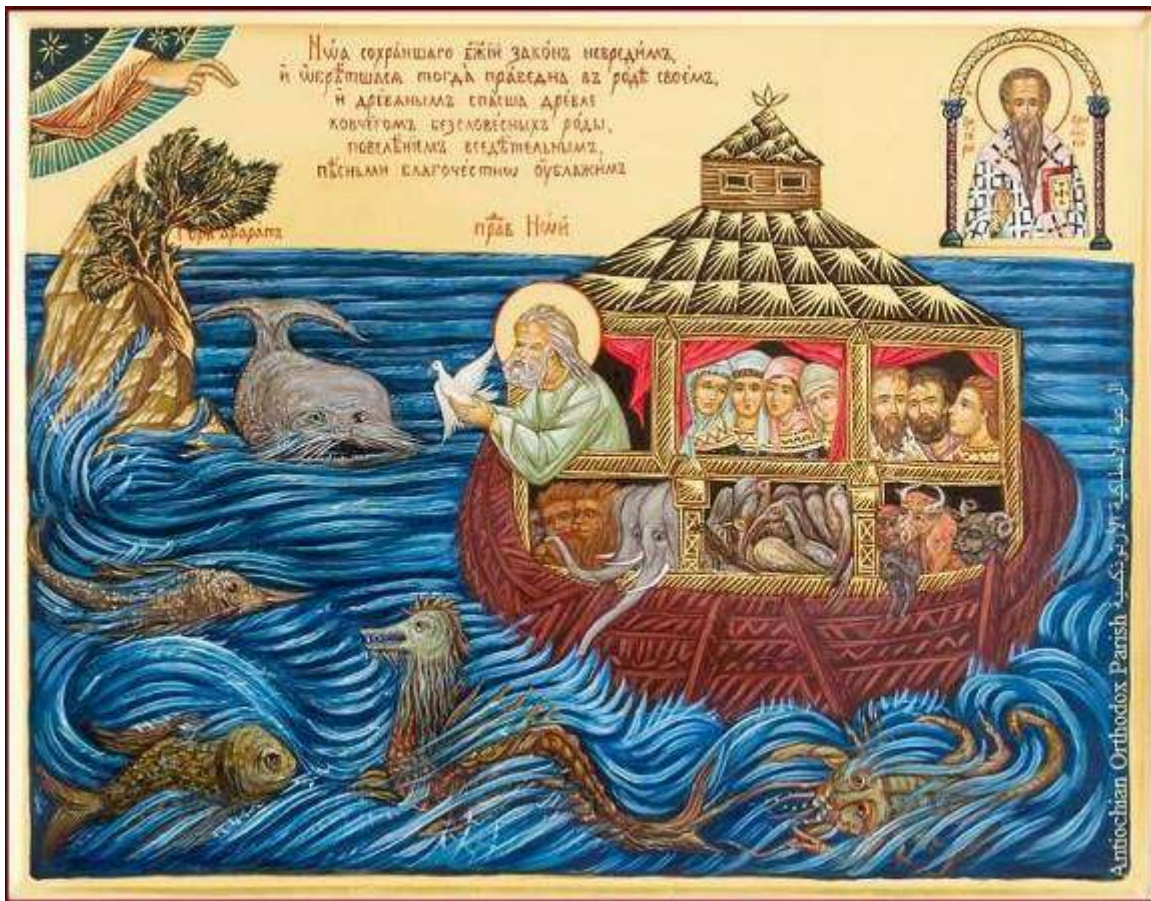
**Sieger Köder (German, 1925-2015), *End of the Flood*, 2008**

Even with the bold and cheerful colors of the rainbow over the ark, one recognizes the reality of the human losses in the skulls appearing in the water beneath the ark.



**Hieronymus Bosch (Dutch, c.1450-1516), *Flood*.  
c1514-16**

Known for his surrealist and sometimes macabre landscapes, Bosch here depicts the human and material detritus from the Flood.



**Orthodox Icons of Noah and the Ark**

The bodies of the dead are not the only residents of the deep. This icon depicts Noah releasing a dove to find dry land as various sea creatures circle the ark looking for food.



**A woodcut of Noah's Ark from Anton Koberger's German Bible**

Here the waters beneath the ark are populated by mythical creatures such as mermaids.



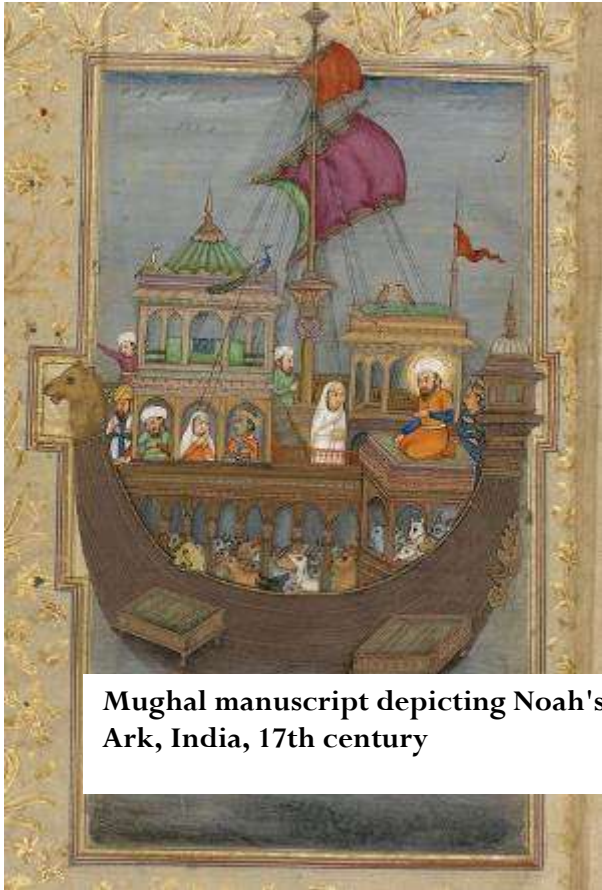
**Charles Willson Peale (American, 1741-1827) (after Charles Catton), *Noah and His Ark*, 1819**

Without dwelling unduly on the casualties, Peale here strikes an effective balance of darkness and light—the sun shining through the stormy sky—which effectively captures the theological message of the story—hope amidst the punishment and disaster.



**Marius van Noach (Dutch), *Noah's Ark*, 2005**

Noah goes a step further in bringing some humor into the scene, by depicting the challenge of having to move the animals from the Ark atop Mt Ararat to the dry ground below.



Mughal manuscript depicting Noah's Ark, India, 17th century

And water covered the whole earth...

The experience of a great flood is not unique to the Hebrew Scriptures, but is a historical memory that is shared across many cultures in Eurasia. It is not surprising then that the story of Noah, which is respected in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religion, is also the subject of art outside of Europe.



Noahs Ark. 16th C. Ottoman Art

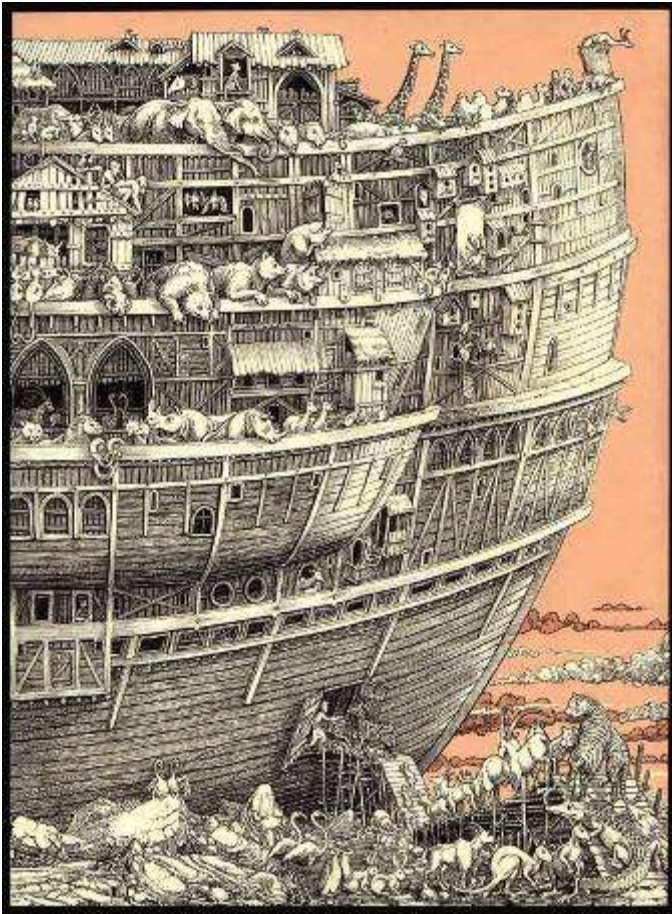




Nusret Çolpan (Turkish, 1952-2008),  
*Noah's Ark*, 1993



Miskin, one of the greatest painters in the  
workshop of the Mughal emperor Akbar  
(r. 1556-1605)



Tomislav Tomic (Croatian), *Noah's Ark*, contemporary

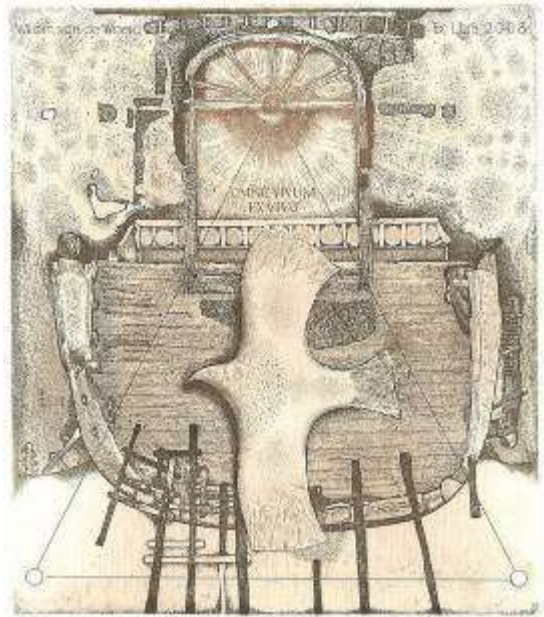


Simon de Myle (British), *Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat*, 1570

De Myle suggests Noah was able to invent a better way to get the animals off the ark, than is suggested above in Noah's interpretation.



**Katarina Smetanova (Slovak, 1964-), *Noah's Ark***



**Ivan Rusachek (Belarusian, 1976-), *Noah's Ark***

Noah's Ark remains a popular theme among graphic artists, especially in Eastern Europe. Here are a selection from in a collection of East European Ex Libris (book stamps). There is humor in Smetanova's etching, where the ark seems to cut through the waves like a huge ocean liner, its animal passengers crowded on deck for a better view. Rusachek presents both the ark and the dove, which signals the end of the flood, in a highly structured composition, built around a triangle with a radiant sun at its apex, suggesting the all-seeing eye of God. The plates of Baramov and Velikov also present the hopeful end of the story. The sun breaks through the clouds, the waters recede, a mountain is in sight, and in the Baramov print, a few of the animals on board try out their land legs on waterlogged ground. Weiser's small linocut shows the ark resting on Mt. Ararat like the first habitat for humanity in a newly restored world.



**Robert Baramov (Bulgarian, 1966-), *Noah's Ark***



**Peter Velikov (Bulgarian, 1975-), Noah's Ark**



**Josef Weiser (Czech, 1847-1911), Noah's Ark**



**Budimir Dimitrijevic (Serbian, 1971-), Noah's Ark**

Serbian Printmaker Dimitrijevic shows us the famous biblical craft long after its landing on Mount Ararat. Serenely set in a garden where birds build their nests, the dry-docked ark has become the foundation for a multi-towered and domed church in the Eastern Orthodox style. Dimitrijevic's image harkens back to the writings of the Early Church Fathers, who saw Noah's ark as a type of the Church, which saves humanity from the evils of this world just as the ark brought Noah's family safely through the flood.

Abstract Art of the Ark

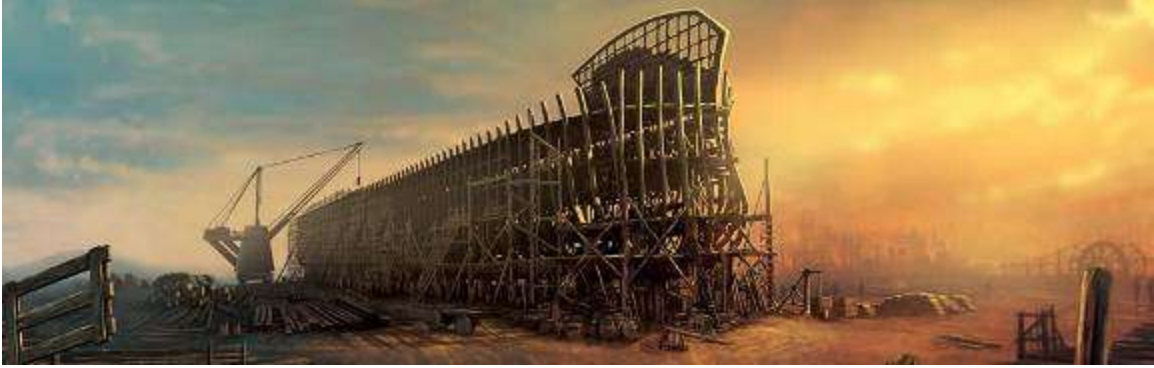


Colin Dudley (British, 1923-), *Noah's Ark*



Sam Millard (Canadian, 1985-), *Noah's Ark*, contemporary

## The Art of Building the Ark



Artist unknown, *Noah Building the Ark*, in Jehovah's Witnesses material

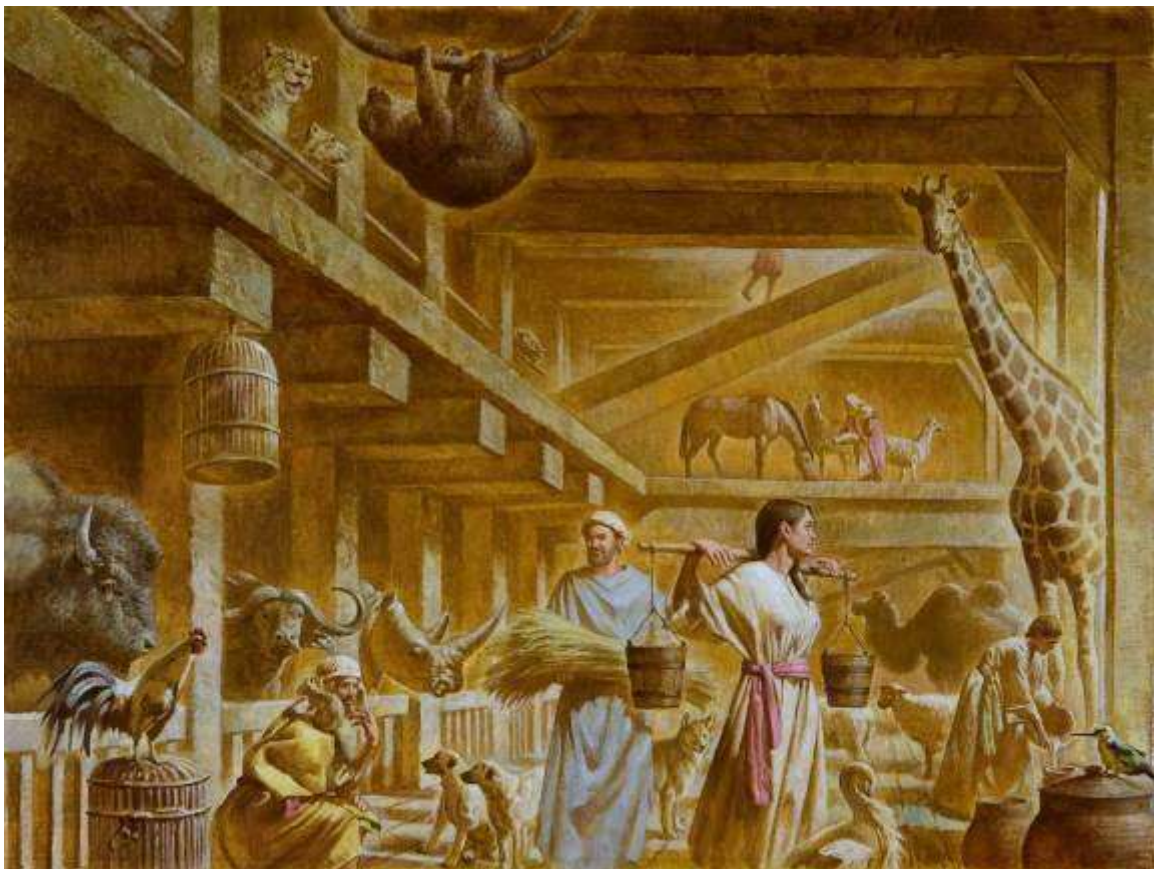


James Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *Building the Ark*, c1896-1902

Life Aboard the Ark



Joaquin Ramirez (Spanish, 1839-66), *Interior of Noah's Ark*, 1857



Robert T. Barrett (American, 1949-), *Inside the Ark*



**Andrei Ryabushkin (Russian, 1861-1904), *Noah's Ark*, 1882**



**John Everett Millais (British, 1829-1896), *The Return of the Dove to the Ark*, 1851**





**Armando Romero (Mexican, 1964-), *The Deluge (El Diluvio)***

One cannot miss the pop culture images that the artist has included among the wreckage of the antediluvian (“pre-flood”) world. Does this suggest a connection intended between the wickedness that characterized the earth before the Flood and the idolatry prevalent in society today?



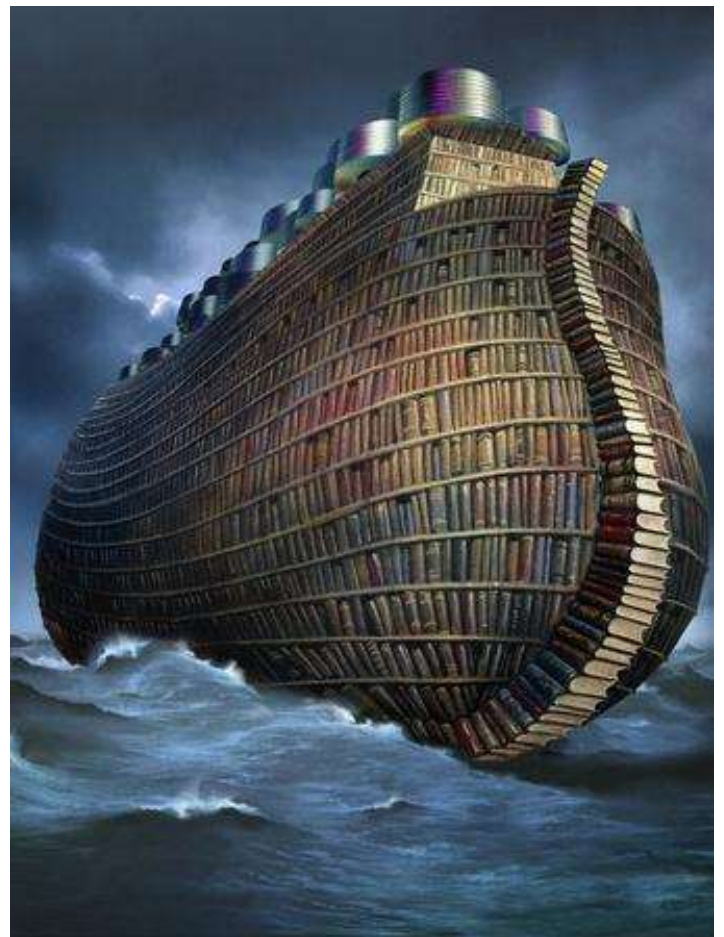
**He Qi (Chinese, 1951-), *The Ark of Noah, 2005***

He has here humorously painted an iconographic painting of the Ark, that at the same time pays homage to the iconic scene in the popular movie, *Titanic* (1997). In fact, he himself drew a direct comparison, describing it as his own version of ‘Titanic’ with the Iceberg safely in the past and the rainbow symbolic of hope and promise for the future.



**Pierre Droal (French), *Noah's Ark Reboot*, 2013**

Droal's "rebooting" of the story of the Flood in modern times, with an oil tanker as the ark, suggests that the deluge was a result of some great ecological disaster. This idea is not that far from the understanding of the Genesis story, who saw ecological destruction, even on a small scale, to be caused by moral—and spiritual—failure.



**Wieslaw Smetek (Polish, 1955-), *Preservation of Knowledge-Ark of Literature***

Here the ark is used to symbolize the preservation of literature and knowledge by, say, a library or historically by the Church.

**In the End, Hope...**



**Sawai Chinnawong (Thai, 1959–), *Genesis 9:13*, 2004**

And the conclusion of the story of the Flood is hope: “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. . . .I have placed my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” (Gen 9:11, 13)