

# 5 prayer prompts

## Savoring ancient bible stories in Christian life

The story of Noah's Ark is filled with vivid images, dynamic stories, concrete symbols. Since childhood have you ever paused to dwell on these images and symbols, to play with them, to allow each one to speak to you afresh as an adult Catholic? Here is your chance!



### 1. Rainbow

The rainbow... A symbol of covenant and reconciliation. Don't pass by a rainbow without lifting up your eyes and heart to God and remembering the divine promise.



### 2. Flood waters

When you drink, shower, swim, recall the potency of water as a biblical symbol; e.g., waters of creation, of the flood, of the Nile, of the Red Sea, of birth, of baptism...



### 3. Ark

Noah's ark is not a serious boat as in other ancient flood stories but a floating vessel without rudder, sail or crew! It depends not on human skill but on the will of God.



### 4. Animals

Noah is instructed by God to gather 'all creatures of every kind' (Gen. 7:14). Does this line sound familiar? Compare with the creation account in Gen. 1:24-25.



### 5. Dove

Reflect on the biblical image of the dove bearing an olive leaf, a sign of hope to Noah that the flood waters had decreased (Gen. 8:11).

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes is designed to encourage parishioners to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: [www.batkol.info](http://www.batkol.info) and [www.etz-hayim.com](http://www.etz-hayim.com).



## Light of Torah

Ancient texts  
through fresh eyes,  
alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Just as rain comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the Torah; one studies a bit today and some more tomorrow, until in time one becomes like a flowing stream."*

Song of Songs Rabbah

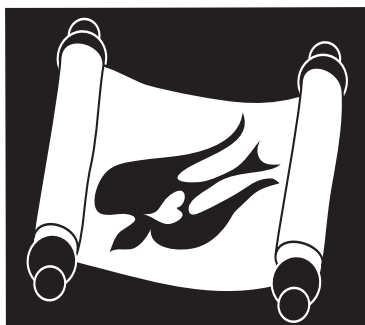
This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, encourages Catholics to reflect upon the Torah (the first five books of the bible) with the help of Jewish sources and insights. Why would a Catholic want to turn to Judaism to enrich his/her bible education? Well, the Jewish people have a special place in the history of biblical interpretation. It was from the Jewish people that we received the bible, and it was the Torah (and the other writings of the Hebrew Scriptures) that informed the faith of Jesus and the early church.

Christianity did not emerge out of the blue; it grew out of Judaism. To grow to full maturity, the Church needs the rich soil of the Jewish faith in which she is planted.

How does an everyday Catholic get in touch with this 'rich soil' of the Jewish faith? A simple way to begin is to read this leaflet series. It makes available some of the gems of insight passed down through centuries of Jewish biblical reflection. In the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission:

*"Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion."*

(Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 1995)



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 6:9–11:32

The story of Noah's Ark is well known and loved by Christians from childhood. Yet how many have ever heard an exploration of the character of Noah through the Jewish biblical tradition? Read the Noah story (or read, at least, chapter 6 of Genesis). Then focus on the opening verses and join the sages of Israel as they open up a surprising topic of debate...

1. *Bereshit Rabbah*. See Leibowitz, 62.

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

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

# Tasting Torah

In the opening verse of our Torah portion we read: “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 sages of Israel! Through centuries of Torah reflection we find a lively debate as to whether Noah's righteousness was all that it appeared to be. Pause to ponder this, revisiting Gen. 6:9 and its surrounding verses. Why do you think Noah's virtue might be called into question?

# Touching Torah

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. Noah was blameless ‘in his age,’ but what a wicked age it was! If Noah had lived in a righteous age he would have seemed 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 and Abraham reacted differently in the face of God's anger. Abraham begged for God's mercy on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33), yet there was no such outcry from Noah when he heard of God's intention to destroy the earth. He simply went about building an ark, presumably concerned only for his and his family's salvation.

# Depthing Torah

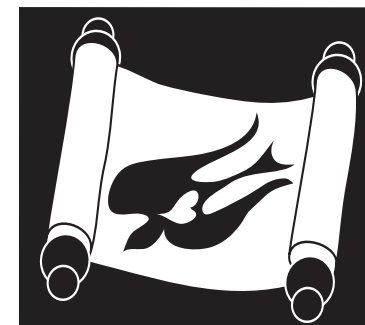
The sages probed the Hebrew text further, noting that while Noah walked ‘with’ God (Gen. 6:9), Abraham walked (literally) ‘before’ God (Gen. 17:1). In one ancient story (1), Rabbi Yehudah depicts Noah as sinking in the mire of a godless generation but with the desire to extricate himself. Unable to do 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 imaginative comparisons between biblical characters? If we find ourselves lulled into a one-eyed view of a bible story, the sages remind us that the Word of God holds multiple interpretations, that it calls for our active engagement, and that it is a holy task to bring our questions of faith – robust, surprising and challenging – to our reading of the text.

# Doing Torah

- Is there a bible story that you take for granted? What questions can you bring to the text?
- Are we Catholics too ‘polite’ with the bible? What do the sages teach us by their insistent questioning and lively debates?
- What do you think... Was Noah a righteous man? What does it take to be righteous?



## Faith & Life

“Noah was a righteous man” (Gen.6:9).

**What does it take to be righteous? A school teacher says:**

“Teaching six graders can be a challenge. Today one of my students dumped his ‘girlfriend.’ He was brutal about it. Told everyone she was ugly and that he didn't like her any more. She was very upset. Once I would have quickly dismissed the whole thing, (‘after all, they're just kids’). But having had the experience, as an adult, of being dumped by my girlfriend, it occurred to me that NOW is the time when patterns are laid and life lessons learned. So I held back Mr Casanova after school and we had a little talk, ‘man-to-man,’ about how to treat people with respect.”