Tales of a huge flood sent by the gods appear in cultures throughout the world. North American Indians and Siberian peasants each have a legend about how a small group of animals and people were saved from a watery death. However, the two most famous accounts come from the Middle East. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* from Babylon tells how the King and his family were spared from the wrath of the storm god by heeding the instructions of the god of water to build a giant boat. More familiar to people in Western cultures is the Genesis account of Noah and the great flood.

Noah’s story is the Old Testament tale most often retold in picture books. In fact, dozens of versions have been produced by authors and illustrators in the United States. But the fascination with Noah’s story continues in other parts of the world as well, as a number of picture books demonstrate. Indeed, the continuing interest indicates that Noah indeed sails in international waters.

Probably the most familiar Noah’s ark picture book, at least to audiences in the United States, is the one by Peter Spier, which won the Caldecott award in 1978. But even those who have examined Spier’s book may have forgotten that he chose as its “text” a 17th century poem by Jacobus Revius, which he translated from Dutch to English. Using this poem from his native country, Spier amplifies both its simple text and the Biblical version through his marvellously detailed and evocative illustrations. The poem’s long list of boarding animals, including

Cow and moose,
Hare and goose,
Sheep and ox,
Bee and fox

is reflected in pictures of the loading of the ark which teem with all kinds and sizes of animals. But neither the poem nor Spier ignores the reality of those who could not get on.

But the rest,
Worst and best,
Stayed on shore,
Were no more.
The whole host
Gave the ghost.
They were killed
For the guilt
Which brought all
To the Fall.

The illustrations show a throng of animals, young and old, watching the ark as the flood water rises. Inexorably they are covered, even those which climbed into trees to escape.

Spier’s imagination takes over in his pictures of life on board since neither the Bible nor Revius’ poem supplies details of the trip. But the reader senses the “rightness” of the portrayal because it is consistent with our knowledge of animal life. The animals must be fed and their stalls cleaned. They give birth, some, like the rabbits, with remarkable regularity. And they rejoice when the dove returns with green leaves. Spier enriches the reader’s understanding of Noah’s story, and the book well deserves its Caldecott medal.

As might be expected, the book that adheres most closely to the Old Testament comes from Israel. Yael Guiladi stresses God’s anger about what people had done to his world, an emphasis apparent in most books that give God a prominent role. In Guiladi’s version, God had given people a “general idea of how He expected them to
behave,” but they became wicked, dishonest, cruel, and corrupt. When God plans to destroy the world, he tells Noah to take a pair of most animals but seven pairs of clean animals. This injunction, which is found in Genesis, is ignored in most retellings of Noah’s story but would have significance for Jewish readers because of their religious practices. Other parts of Guiladi’s story, such as the exact specifications of the ark’s dimensions, reveal a faithfulness to Old Testament details not observed in most versions. The illustrations portray Noah and his family as inhabitants of the Middle East. All have slightly slanted eyes and dark hair and complexions. The women have large earrings and cover their heads with a garment that extends to their feet.

The illustrations for Swiss poet Max Bolliger’s retelling also have an Eastern feeling. Helga Aichinger has used spare figures and muted colors to accompany Bolliger’s text, which is close to Genesis. Again God is a dominant force, displeased with people because they disobeyed and then laughed at Noah for his obedience. “Their scorn did not trouble Noah. But God was angry with them because they did not fear Him, and because they laughed.” These scoffers die a horrible death, as Bolliger emphasizes when he describes their flight to the hills and mountains in a futile attempt to escape. Dead bodies float in green and purple water in Aichinger’s gruesome depiction of their fate. Bolliger’s account of the trip’s length and the various flights of raven and dove follows strictly the Genesis version. When the water recedes, all that people had built and planted has been destroyed. Certainly this is a grim tale, particularly for a picture book. But then Bolliger offers his readers hope, the same hope Noah feels looking at God’s rainbow sign.

God heard Noah’s prayer of thanks
He looked at the ruined earth
and had pity
on Noah, whom He loved,
and on his family—

his wife,
his three sons,
their wives,
and children,
and all the children of these children,
who were not yet born.

This stress on life’s continuity is clear in the picture of a small boy and girl playing with a miniature ark in a puddle. Noah and his family were spared so that life could go on.

Two more recent stories, also originally written in German, display similarities to Bolliger’s retelling. Gertrud Fussenegger shares Bolliger’s emphasis on the wickedness of humankind and its horrible destruction. In her story Noah prays every night that God would keep him safe from people who “lied and cheated and hurt one another ... beat defenceless [sic] people with whips and sticks.” These wicked men and women mock Noah and his family until the rain starts to fall. Then they pack their gold and head for the mountains. Inside the ark Noah hears their “pitiful wailing” as even “the last and strongest of the people, who had clung to the treetops or climbed mountain peaks, were washed away and drowned.” Life on board the ark has its own discomforts, but at the journey’s end, Noah and his family praise God for their deliverance and receive his rainbow and promise not to destroy the world again with a flood.

Margrit Haubensak—Tellenbach also includes the destruction of the doubters, who “cried and screamed and banged on the ark” as the waters cover them. But her account shares another theme with Bolliger’s as well: the continuation of life. Animals give birth while they journey on the ark, and as they depart, Noah instructs them to “Go and have lots of children.” Two double-page spreads, one on shipboard and one on land, emphasize the theme. The pages are jammed with animals and their young in illustrations by Erna Emhardt, one of Germany’s foremost “primitive painters.”

The concern with reproduction is strongest in an Italian version by Jolanda Colombini
Monti, who emphasizes what happens after the flood. Once God has explained about the rainbow, the animals start to leave the ark. God instructs them to “wander over the Earth, grow and multiply.” Many of them do not need those instructions. Baby mice and rabbits leave the ship with their parents. The text mentions that “even the ostrich alighting from the Ark showed Noah a little baby ostrich just a few days old who was still a little unsteady on his huge legs.” The fertility of the animals is even more apparent in the fold-out illustration in which almost every species has been eager to follow God’s command to “raise a family and multiply the species.” This emphasis does not seem unusual for a country that is heavily Roman Catholic, particularly when we note that it was written in the mid-1950s. Another part of the story that seems to indicate the religious influence is the ending in which Noah becomes a farmer who is the first to discover the importance of bread and wine. Although Genesis acknowledges that Noah planted a vineyard, and Spier shows him on his hands and knees setting out vines, Monti is the only author to give such prominence to this part of the tale, linking it to the Roman Catholic sacraments.

Another strongly religious retelling comes in a Liberian version of Noah’s story. While Lorenz Graham was in Africa, he heard the native people telling stories from the Bible, “recreating the tales in their own environment and telling them in their own words.” In their version, God plays a crucial role. They begin by tying Noah’s story to the creation.

God make the time for Him Own Self.
He make the rain
He make the dry and wet.

Disappointed and angered by what people are doing to His creation, God decides that He must try again. He visits Noah and instructs him about preparations for the flood, then becomes an active participant in the boat’s construction.

God come walk about inside the ship
And Noah hear God’s Word and mind.

He advises Noah about bad boards that need replacement, locations of rooms, and other details. In keeping with the African origin of this version, the illustrations depict Noah and his sons as blacks and the boat as a kind of basket that might have been constructed of materials found in a tropical region. Noah and his sons fell palm trees to get building materials. When all the animals are on board in accordance with God’s instructions, He makes the rain fall. After He is certain that everything has been destroyed except for Noah’s ship, He opens new holes in the sea to drain away the water, sends dry winds to sweep the world, and sets the ship down softly. There are no raven and dove in this version. God is the one who provides for Noah and his company, and the flood has been for His benefit, giving a way to start again, as the book’s ending makes clear:

And in the sky He set Him bow
And turn to make a better world.

The African story ignores the raven and dove but stays close to Genesis in plot and moral. A Japanese picture book gives the two birds a prominent place, and in so doing demonstrates how modern authors often move away from the Biblical tale. In 1964 Pooke and Kark in the Ark by Sekuji Miyoshi was voted the outstanding picture book in Japan. Although Miyoshi includes other animals in his story, he concentrates on two birds: Kark the crow and Pooke the dove. After God tells Noah that a drought will be followed by heavy rains, Noah constructs an ark and begins collecting animals. His neighbors laugh at the strange vehicle which looks like a large wooden box due to Noah’s inadequate building skills. Kark refuses to board because his forest home is on a hilltop, and he is convinced no flood can reach it. Pooke urges him to follow Noah, and eventually the crow is forced to join the other animals on the boat. After the rain ends and the boat drifts for 150 days,
the animals get restless. Kark decides to find land, and when he does not return, the animals begin to worry. Pooke volunteers to search for him, and eventually she finds dry land and Kark. Unlike the crow, she feels obligated to return to her shipmates. On the return trip she gets tired and cannot find the ark. Then she sees the rainbow, which gives her new energy. "She flapped her wings with all her strength, and passed under the rainbow toward the ark."

Miyoshi has kept many of the Biblical elements but given prominence to two birds which figure in that tale. They act independently of Noah and have definite personalities. The illustrations are brilliantly colored and exhibit a fine graphic sense. Bright orange, purple, brown, blue, green, and other hues are arranged in patterns that make the reader aware that this book is a product of the "modern" period which revises an ancient story. Yet Miyoshi's contrast of the believer versus the doubter echoes a theme of the original account. Here the contrast is between two birds instead of between Noah and his neighbors.

Like Miyoshi, Isaac Bashevis Singer uses the dove as a central character in his tale about the ark. Just as Spier returned to the language of his youth to find a text for his work, Singer used his childhood language, Yiddish, and let Elizabeth Shub translate the work into English. While Noah and his sons construct the boat at God's command, the animals argue because they "had heard a rumor that Noah was to take with him on the ark only the best of all the living creatures." Each stresses his own virtue such as strength, beauty, or cleverness. Almost the entire book is devoted to their bickering. Finally Noah appears and sees a dove silently perched on a branch. It explains why it didn't brag by saying, "Each one of us has something the other doesn't have, given us by God who created us all." Then Noah tells all the animals that they can come on board, but because the dove had been modest, Noah chooses it to be his messenger. The flood itself doesn't appear. The text simply skips to the time when the rains stop, and Noah keeps his word by sending the dove. The story ends with the moral that "there are in the world more doves than there are tigers, leopards, wolves, vultures, and other ferocious beasts. The dove lives happily without fighting." Although Singer mentions God's promise not to destroy the earth again because of sin, the focus of Singer's tale is on the dove and the example it provides. His tale is designed to teach a moral that is not explicitly stated in the Old Testament but which he obviously feels is important for contemporary readers.

Similarly, British author Brian Wildsmith adapts Noah's story to address a modern problem, man's destruction of the natural world through pollution. While Wildsmith looks back to the ancient story for his central idea of the survival of animals from extinction, he sets his own tale in the future for a type of "science fiction" story of Noah. The animals who live in the forest are threatened by air pollution and meet to decide how to escape. Owl reports that he has seen a "huge and wondrous object" being built, and when the animals investigate, they find Professor Noah, who is constructing a spaceship to take the animals to another planet where the forests "will be as beautiful as our forest once was before it was spoiled by pollution." The animals help Noah's robots finish the task and prepare for the voyage of 40 days and 40 nights. They clamber on board to escape a terrible forest fire set by man and blast into space. In the take-off a time guidance fin is damaged, and an elephant must don a spacesuit to adjust it for their voyage into the future. However, he miscalculates, and the ship is propelled backward. After they land, Noah realizes that the leaf the dove brings from her exploratory mission is from Earth—but what a difference! They have landed on Earth "as it was many hundreds of years
ago, before it was polluted.” As the animals emerge from the ship, the otter comments that there seems to have been some flooding.

While the problem and solution Wildsmith uses are “modern,” his retention of certain conventions clearly reveals his awareness of the original: 40 days and 40 nights, the dove as explorer, the watery world. As in Miyoshi’s and Singer’s books, the animals here are active participants in the advancement of the plot. In fact, Noah is the only human and does not even take his own family on the voyage. Like all Wildsmith’s picture books, this one is brightly colored. The many animals in the story give him a chance to exhibit his considerable talent in drawing wildlife.

The animals tell their own story in another English picture book about Noah by George Macbeth. In fact, inanimate objects get to speak too. Macbeth offers a series of short poems, each about a different plant, animal, or object encountered in Noah’s story. After the descriptive poem about the story element, the subject makes its own comment on the situation. Oak and pine speak during the “Building of the Ark.” Then 11 animals have their say while they enter. For example, Noah has this conversation with a roly-poly bear.

are you there? Why you smell
of honey. You voracious small bear!
Why have you come with your paws all
sticky? Go down to the sink.
You must dance for your
supper, and it won’t be sweets.
Coarse brown bread for omnivorous
bears. And a beaker of brine
if we have to keep washing you in drinking water.

I am sorry, Noah. But I grew
quite faint. So I stopped by a hive
for a rest and a meal.
Let me give you a hug.

During the storm a “Battle with the Elements” pits Noah against thunder, lightning, rain, and wind as all the creatures on board suffer.

rain
is the one who goes on. He is flung
pita-pata-pita-pata from a
tipped bowl of dry peas. Wet fur,
wet wood, wet wings, wet canvas: the
whole wide world is awash in a
sluice of beans. Rattle, rush.
Down comes the roof in a slush
of cold glass bits. Below decks
glum beasts peer out and steam dry slowly.

Finally, sand, rock, and grass welcome the voyagers when they come safely to their “Landing of Ararat.” The dove and the raven feed peacefully in the thick grass filled with flowers, worms, bees, ants, butterflies, and a spider. Two pages of poetry are followed by two pages which illustrate the subjects of the verse. The ark is invariably portrayed as a small vessel, whether dwarfed by the whale that swims beside it or buffeted by wind.

Macbeth’s use of short poems based on Noah’s adventure is reminiscent of a much earlier English version by Fish, published in 1918. Each short poem is on a different topic, and the author claims that he was told about the trip by a teddy bear named Redder.

He knew the Noahs very well
And went with them to sea,
And all that I am going to tell
Young Redder told to me.

All the animals look as though they had stuffed toys as models, and even the people look like wooden dolls. The journey is idyllic, with time for the animals to swim in their striped suits and enjoy the outing immensely, rather as though the ark were a well-appointed yacht.

This portrayal of the ark as a kind of cruise ship appears in a modern British version of Noah’s story by Judy Brook. After Noah learns about the impending flood from a well-informed dove, he hurriedly constructs a giant ship, complete with striped sails and a royal lion masthead. Noah and his family are sturdy English peasants,
used to handling farm animals. The women have a cozy farm kitchen on board and geraniums in the windows. Rather than bringing the animals to the ark, the Noah family sails around the world to rescue a pair of each kind. They take polar bears and walruses on board before the ice floes melt and ferry zebras and lions from mountain tops. Each day the animals run around the deck for exercise and hear Mrs. Noah's bedtime stories. When land is sighted, everyone gratefully takes “a lovely hot sunny holiday” on the African coast, where the Noah family members lounge in beach chairs. Then the ark completes another round-the-world voyage to return the animals, who “always felt so sad when the Ark left them, they were almost sorry the flood was over.” Clearly, Brook's story lacks any sense of punishment or destruction inherent in the original.

The same barnyard adventure format is obvious in Norah's Ark, also from Britain. Norah and her animals learn of the impending flood from a TV weatherman. They turn the barn upside down to form a makeshift boat and have a “holiday afloat.” Despite a few minor complications, no one is hurt, and when the water subsides, the animals and their owner are left with an enlarged pond, something they had wanted for a long time. Like the rest of the British books, this lacks any theological dimension. Instead the flood is simply a diversion from everyday activities.

A similar attitude is evident in two French versions. The first, by Mathias (Charles Henriot), has Noah invite all the animals to board his multi-storied yacht, which resembles a tiered apartment building. On top is a little house for Noah's family. The animals tell each other stories, and at night they "were very good and slept without making a sound." When the sun shines after 40 days, the elephants tip the ark to one side with their jumps of delight. The animals rush to disembark on Ararat and return to their countries when the water has receded. Because no reason for the flood is given and no word of hope offered at the end, despite the rainbow that appears in the sky, the story seems flat and strangely without purpose. Noah in his red beret and his wife in her long blue apron are undeniably French, but the illustrations are almost as unsatisfactory as the text with blobs of bright colors scattered randomly over figures drawn with black ink.

The other French version, by Etienne Delessert, reveals its kinship to some of the English versions in its title, Sans Fin La Fete. The party is to celebrate the launching of Captain Noah's boat, and the crows deliver the party invitations. All kinds of animals converge on the ark for a sea cruise. They eat cake and ice cream and watch the snake do acrobatics. The party is fine until they decide to hold a jumping contest. The flea jumps so high that it hits the sun in the eye, and the uncontrolled tears lead to a serious flood. The animals retreat inside but continue the party with story telling. As the days pass, they play games, take turns steering, and hold concerts, but eventually they become restless and irritable. They play practical jokes and plan a mutiny. While Noah listens to the centipede tell story after story, the seal changes course. The dove, a peaceful creature, dislikes the mutiny and flies in search of land. Soon she returns with a branch and a postcard showing a mountain she discovered. The animals once again have reason to celebrate.

Probably the strangest detail in the illustration of this version is the "human" sun which has facial features plus suit-coated arms and hands. His two-fingered V salute after the rain ends resembles the gesture of a politician, particularly since he also displays a toothy grin. Even this bizarre account reveals its derivation from the original Noah story although the elements are definitely transformed. For example, the rainbow appears at the end in the guise of a chameleon that "turned every color of the rainbow." The Biblical interpretation of its presence as a sign of divine promise has been replaced by
a natural phenomenon. As in many of the books already discussed, God simply has no role.

Although these secular versions may be designed to satisfy modern audiences who no longer believe in traditional religion, the stories are unsatisfying. By removing God and religious overtones, the authors have removed much of the conflict and drama as well. Good and evil, struggle against the elements, rebirth and hope for the future are all part of the original story. The idea that representatives of all earth's animals could be crammed on a single vessel and somehow survive an overwhelming catastrophe is incongruous, unbelievable . . . and yet, we want to believe that escape from destruction is possible. Like the believers in various gods who told the original legends, we maintain our fascination with the story of one family that sailed the endless sea when the world was just beginning.

LITERATURE CITED


