



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about our Bibles, beliefs, movements,
institutions and events of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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Noah's Ark: Where Beliefs & Facts Collide

By Jim Myers

How many of each kind animal did Noah take on the ark? Write your answer in the left margin before we continue. This seems like a very simple question and most Bible readers probably immediately know the answer. But the biblical answer to this question can create some serious challenges to the belief systems of millions of people. *It can also transform the way we read our Bible!*

Rabbi Jeffrey Leynor and I were discussing this subject before making a video about it. It is online at the link below.¹ When he moved from the Northeast to the Bible Belt it didn't take him long to discover that down here there were a lot of people who made it very clear that they believed their Bible is "the inerrant and infallible word of God. They believe it contains no errors or contradictions, because every word in their Bible came directly from God." Encountering so many fundamentalist was a new experience for the rabbi.

He said this seemed so strange not only because he was a Jew, but also because he had been trained in rabbinic thought. He reminded me of some of our meeting with Jewish friends. When they were asked what they thought about a question it was not unusual for someone to answer, "*On the one hand, I think the answer is so-and-so.*" And then, a few minutes later, the same person would say, "*But you know, on the other hand, the answer could so-and-so (something else).*"

Rabbinic literature abounds in what may look like similar contradictions, because it is not systematic scientific thinking. It is also different from Christian theological thinking. Most of the people who laid the foundations of Rabbinic and Christian thought did it before the Scientific Revolution. *The focus of rabbinic thought was always very close to the complexities of life as experienced by the people. Christian theology focused more on correct beliefs and the afterlife.*

If you have read many rabbinic writings, then you probably know that they abound with questions on which the rabbis answer with a variety of positions. They remind me of Supreme Court decisions, which contain majority and minority

opinions. It is not unusual for even the same rabbi to hold opposite positions on the same question. I believe that one factor that influenced the development of Jewish thought in general, and rabbinic thought specifically, is the meticulous way they study their Scriptures.

The reason I asked the above question about the number of each kind of animal that Noah took on the ark was not to find out the animals – *it is to help you see how beliefs about our Bible affect how we react when beliefs and facts collide. What do you do when your beliefs disagree with the facts?* We may find out now when we turn to the Bible for the answer to the question about the animals. Make sure you have written your answer down first. In Genesis 6:19-20 we read:

You are to bring into the ark **two of all living creatures, male and female**, to keep them alive with you. **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.

The Bible clearly states that God told Noah to take 2 of every kind of bird, animal and creature with him on the ark. Right? This is the answer I would have given. I probably first learned it when I was coloring pictures of the animals getting on the ark many years ago in Sunday School. I can still picture them in my mind, all lined up two of each kind. Therefore, **it is a fact that the Bible says that God told Noah to take 2 of each kind**. Is that what you wrote above? Now let's turn to the next chapter and read Genesis 7:2-3:

Take with **you seven pairs** of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and **one pair** of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also **seven pairs** of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth.

The Bible clearly states that God told Noah to take seven pairs of some animals and birds, and one pair of others. Therefore, **it is a fact that the Bible says that God told Noah to take 14 of some and 2 of others**. Right? Is that what you wrote above?

So, what is the correct answer to the question? *The correct answer is that in one place the Bible says God told Noah to take 2 of every animal, but in another place it says that God told Noah to take 14 of some and 2 of others.* It is also a fact. Is that what you wrote above? If not, how are we to deal this problem?

Let's start with asking how a person using scientific thinking deals with it. Science says -- *if you have two contradictory accounts of the same event, both accounts cannot be accurate.* In other words, if both of the above accounts are about the same event, then either 2 or 14 must be the answer. It cannot be both 2 and 14.

Now let's consider how a person deals with this if he believes his Bible is "the inerrant infallible word of God and that it contains no contradictions or errors." Some simply ignore it, while others create some very complicated commentaries to try to make 2 = 14. They unusually end up saying something like – "God in His infinite wisdom" followed by something that doesn't make much sense. Keep in mind that we are not talking about a disagreement over an interpretation. The biblical text clearly gives two different answers. *I imagine that things like this are simply never discussed in many fundamentalist churches.*

So, how does Rabbi Leynor and his rabbinic ancestors deal with it? As Rabbi Leynor said, *"The answer is that in one chapter the biblical text says 2 and in the next chapter it says 14 – so what can we learn from those accounts?"* The lessons that the biblical text contains are more important than the specific number of each kind of animal. They are usually about life. The rabbis ask questions, such as -- why did God make the decision to cause the great flood and end all life that relies on the dry land to survive?

The earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence (**HAMAS**). God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. 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. . . ."²

The people were doing acts of **HAMAS**, which means deeds of outrage and violence. It also describes acts of bearing false witness, causeless hatred, and in general, anything that is harms others.³ *Therefore, one important lesson from the biblical text here is that God pays attention to what people do and holds them accountable for their actions.* Another lesson is that *God saw the evil and the good. He not only saw the **HAMAS** they did, He saw the "**righteousness**" that Noah did.*

Another important lesson is that *God told Noah what he must do to be saved from drowning in the flood waters and God did not do what was required for him.* Noah was the only one to be told this by God and he had to do what he had been told for a long before the flood came. His peers thought he was crazy building a huge ark. *But Noah did what God instructed him to do and it not only saved his life, it saved the lives of his family and preserved animal and bird life on the earth.* Regardless of whether Noah took 2 or 14 animals, **only 8 humans entered the ark** – Noah, his wife, and their sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, and their wives.⁴

Our beliefs about the Bible affect not only how we understand it. They also affect how we relate to others, as well as what we may even be able to see in the

biblical text. It was written long before scientific thinking began and that was not the purpose it was written. *It contains the wisdom that the Jewish scribes valued and wanted to preserve so it could be passed on to the Jewish people and their descendants. It contains lessons about life and how to live it successfully.*

When we allow the biblical text to reveal its wisdom, religious beliefs are transformed from authoritarian-based institutional dogmas into spiritual values that are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. Some fundamentalists have said that if the Bible contains one error, we should just throw it away. But, I suggest that we might need to dump those beliefs instead. We have lived for centuries with many beliefs that collide with the facts. I think it's time to put aside doctrines that clearly don't stand in light of the facts and learn from the ancient wisdom of the biblical text? What do you think? **BHC**

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3gf0ZGSSr8>

² Genesis 6:11-13

³ A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part Two, by U. Cassuto; pp. 52.

⁴ Genesis 5:32

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May Memorials

In Loving Memory

**SIDNEY
PERRY
DOSH, JR.**

**October 18, 1938
May 17, 2006**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to seek those
qualities of mind and heart which they
shared when we walked life's journey
together.*

*May we help to bring closer to fulfillment
their highest ideals and noblest strivings.
May their memories deepen our loyalty to
those things which we valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion.*

*As long as we live, they too will live; for
they are now a part of us, as we remember
them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**SIDNEY
BERRY
WARD, SR.**

**October 3, 1891
May 27, 1976**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

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Should the standard that governs biblical knowledge be – "Well that's what it means to me" – "That's the Word of God" - when the biblical text is involved? Or, should do our best to understand the words of our Bible through the eyes of the ancient authors and consider what they meant to them first?

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