

# Noah's

# Life and Times

B Y S C O T T L A N G S T O N

**T**HE STORY OF NOAH and the ark is one of the most familiar biblical accounts. Reference to it ranges from its use as a theme for decorating nurseries to its serving as the focal point of scholarly discussions. Yet in spite of its familiarity, little is known about the times in which Noah lived.

## Society During Noah's Life

The biblical text is the only source de-

scribing what society and culture were like during Noah's life. Since the date of the flood has been impossible to determine, evidence from sources outside of the Bible cannot be used to clarify this period.<sup>1</sup> In Genesis 6—9 the society of Noah's day is described in different ways, but all of these descriptions paint a picture of a wicked society. As a prelude to the flood account, Genesis 6:1-8 records the strange story of the sons of God taking the daughters of men for wives and

producing a people known as the ancient mighty men. Whatever the interpretation, this passage clearly functions to demonstrate how evil society had become; it sets up the Noah story by show-

**Below left:** A potter's wheel dating from the 14th cent. B.C. The word translated as "frame" or "purpose" is used in Isaiah 29:16 to refer to something the potter made.

**Lesson Reference:**  
**FBS: Genesis 6:5—9:17**



ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/JAMES M. EMORE/HAZOR MUSEUM, ISRAEL (1030/4)



ing the reason God sent a flood to wipe out sinful humanity.

In a passage filled with references and allusions to the earlier account of the creation of the world by God, Genesis 6:5-8 contrasts the goodness of God's creation with the evil that had filled it. The people are described as being very wicked, with every thought constantly inclined toward evil (Gen. 6:5). The language of the passage is vivid. The last phrase of this verse literally reads, "and every frame (or, form, purpose) of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all day" (see also Gen. 8:21).

The word translated as "frame" or "purpose" is used in Isaiah 29:16 to refer to something the potter made. Understood in this way, the image in the Genesis account demonstrates that every human thought was framed or formed by evil. Ironically, a form of the word translated as "frame, form, purpose" in Genesis 6:5 is used in the creation account of Genesis 2. In that chapter God's creating is described using the image of a potter who works his clay into the form of a human.<sup>2</sup> Thus while God created something that was good, humans had purposed to create nothing but evil. The creativity of humans stands in stark contrast to that of God.

The description of the society during Noah's time continues in Genesis 6:11-13 where it is depicted as corrupt, or literally ruined. This ruining of the earth is connected to the violence in society (Gen. 6:11,13). In the three verses describing society, some form of the word translated as "corrupt, ruined" is used four times. The last time it is used (Gen. 6:13) God determined that He was going to destroy, or ruin, the earth and all humanity.<sup>3</sup> Just as people had ruined God's creation through their evil, now God would destroy, or ruin, His creation.

What, then, was life like during Noah's time? The Bible does not describe

it specifically, other than the reference to the presence of violence. The point of the text, however, is not lost. This was an evil society. Yet living in this world was a man who contrasted with everything that his society had become. To highlight this contrast, the description of Noah is introduced in the middle of the description of his society (Gen. 6:8-10).

#### Noah's Life

Genesis 6:9 calls Noah a righteous man who did not share the values or actions of his society. His character, however, went beyond simply being good.<sup>4</sup> He also is described as being blameless in his generation; the word translated

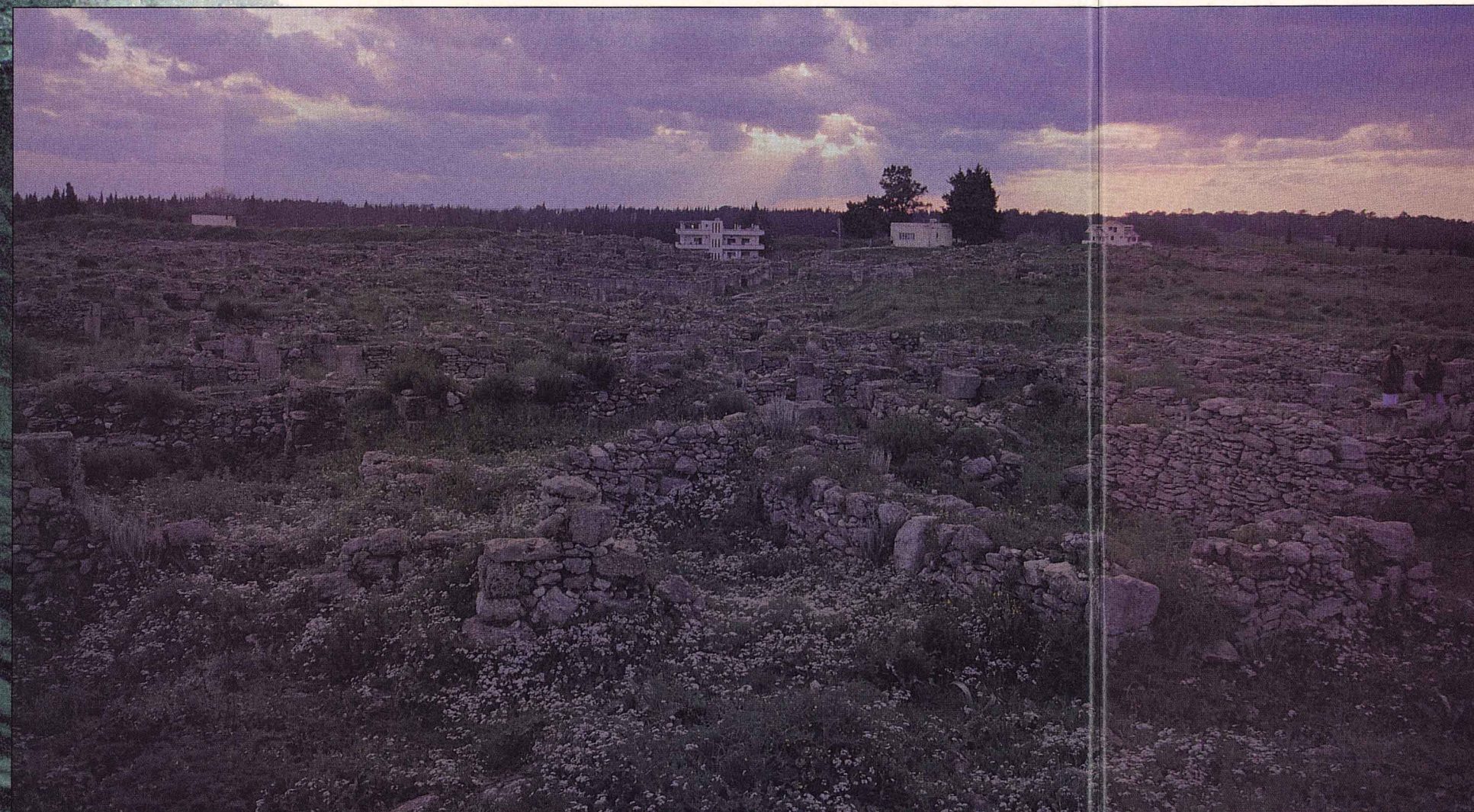
"blameless" literally means "complete, whole, sound, innocent."<sup>5</sup> The description of Noah in Genesis 6—9 helps clarify the meaning of the term "blameless" in this passage. His lifestyle was such that he held the honor of walking with God, a description used elsewhere only of Enoch (Gen. 5:22,24). Characterized as righteous, blameless, and walking with God, Noah's worthiness of such a description reflects itself in his willingness to do whatever God commanded him (Gen. 6:22; 7:5,9). He faithfully carried out all of God's instructions in preparation for the flood. Finally, the Bible emphasized Noah's distinctiveness by asserting that he alone was righteous (Gen. 7:1). As a result of Noah's righteousness, God extended mercy to him and his family. Fittingly, since only Noah obeyed God, only Noah and his family survived the flood.

Yet the flood did not cure the world of sin. Some time after the flood, Noah became drunk and lay naked (Gen. 9:20-29). The biblical text does not focus on

Noah's drunkenness, but instead highlights the actions of Ham, Noah's son. This lack of attention paid to Noah's drunkenness is hard to explain since the Bible clearly denounces such actions (Prov. 23:20-21,29-35). Ham, who did not cover up his father, but went and told his brothers, was denounced. His brothers covered their father; they subsequently were blessed, while Ham's descendants were cursed. Perhaps the explanation for the Bible's condemnation of Ham, rather than Noah, is found in a text discovered at the site of Ugarit, capital of a prominent kingdom located in modern Syria during the second millennium B. C. Among the traits of the ideal son described in this text is that "[he] takes him by the hand when he's drunk, carries him when he's sated with wine." In light of this description, Ham showed disrespect to his father by not fulfilling his duty to preserve his father's honor.<sup>6</sup> After this episode, the Bible traces the spread of sin once again throughout the world.

Outside of the Genesis account, reference to Noah is made rather sparingly in the Bible and nonbiblical books. In Isaiah 54:9 the covenant made with Noah after the flood illustrates God's

**Left:** Overview of the western segment of Ugarit where a text was found that enlightens the Bible's condemnation of Ham.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES MCLENNORE (2/2013)



eternal compassion. Noah is coupled with Daniel and Job in Ezekiel 14:12-20 as examples of exceedingly righteous people. Noah also appears in the Apocrypha, Jewish books written in the intertestamental period but not considered a part of the Jewish or Protestant Bible. He is credited with contributing to the survival of the human race because of his righteousness (Sirach 44:17-18). The New Testament makes further reference to Noah. Matthew 24:36-39 cites the ignorance of the people during Noah's day about the coming flood to illustrate that people do not know when Christ will return. Noah is listed among the great examples of faith in Hebrews 11:7. Furthermore, his experience demonstrates God's ability to rescue the righteous in the day of judgment (2 Pet.

2:4-10). Finally, 1 Peter 3:20 draws an analogy between the flood and baptism.<sup>7</sup>

While not much is known about Noah's life and society, this story stands as a lesson of God's judgment and mercy. It also demonstrates the difference a person can make who, in opposition to his society's lifestyle, lives righteously. Thus the story of Noah communicates a message that remains relevant to today's world.

<sup>1</sup>Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 95 stated: "For the approximate date of the Flood the chief biblical clue, apart from the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 (which are open to more than one interpretation . . .), is the statement that the nations of chapter 10 sprang from the sons of Noah. This seems to imply a very early date indeed, some millennia before the Babylonian floods of around 3000 B.C. which left their physical traces at different times at Ur, Shuruppak, Kish and elsewhere. But it would be guesswork to be more specific than this." Jack Lewis, "Flood" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:798 noted that: "The silt layers noticed at Ur and Kish by Woolley and Langdon (and similar silting at Nineveh, Shuruppak, Uruk, and Lagash) are of differing dates, and lack convincing con-

nection with the biblical narrative. Extremely old sites in Palestine, such as Jericho, have revealed no flood deposits . . . Claims that remains of the biblical ark have been found on the 17,000 foot Agri Dagh peak northwest (sic.) of Lake Van in Turkey (traditional Mount Ararat) are unconvincing; such claims ignore the text of the Bible . . ."

<sup>2</sup>Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrikson, 1979), 427-28 (hereafter cited as BDB).

<sup>3</sup>BDB, 1007-8.

<sup>4</sup>Gordan Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 169-70.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 1071.

<sup>6</sup>This quote comes from a text called "The Tale of Aqhat," or "The Epic of Dan'el (Daniel)," AQHT A, i, lines 32-33. James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 150. Wenham noted (200), "Though this is the natural way to understand the text, Westerners who are strangers to a world where discretion and filial loyalty are supreme virtues have often felt that there must be something more to Ham's offense than appears on the surface."

<sup>7</sup>See Isaac Kikawada, "Noah and the Ark" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1129.

Scott Langston is associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

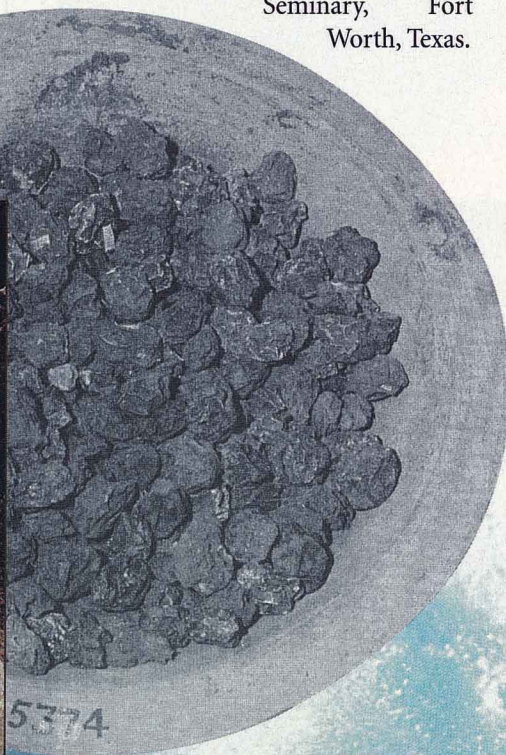
**Below:** A winery at Gibeon.

**Right:** A Dish of Grapes (*Vitis Vinifera* L.).

From a Theban Tomb of the New Kingdom.

Grapes were cultivated from the earliest times and used for the production of wine.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (538/3)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (18/29/19)