

Genesis 7.6-9

Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. ⁷ And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. ⁸ Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, ⁹ two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.

Like a crime scene, Biblical texts leave a host of clues. We do not always recognize them, and even when we do, we may not always be able to understand their meaning and consequences. Regardless, nothing is ever as simple as it might appear. Scratch the surface, and you will be surprised at what you find.

This piece of text from Genesis is a case in point. We aren't even exactly sure when Noah roamed the earth, and while we may sympathize that he had to steer an ark at the ripe old age of 600 (Did he have a special license? A waiver from the DMV?), his very presence is questionable. Furthermore, what sticks out in this portion of text is that Noah not only took two of each animal, but Noah took "clean" and "unclean" animals with him. Why does the text need to stipulate this?

Well, one reason is that certain "clean" animals could be used for sacrifices. Yet, Noah probably didn't live in a world that was highly structured around animal sacrifice. Indeed, the distinction of "clean" and "unclean" animals betrays the influence on the text of someone who is probably a priest involved with the temple sacrificial system at a much later time. What, in part, is interesting is the worldview that we bring to these stories and the way that we write our experience into the narrative itself.

Whoever made certain that Noah took "clean" and "unclean" animals felt so strongly about his or her worldview, that it needed to be included in this grand narrative. Rather than dismiss such writing-into-the-text as a sign challenging the veracity of the story, another way to read this is that the story always possesses room for us to read ourselves into it. So when we read these grand narratives, what do we bring to the text? What might we insert as a point of privilege as well as to make the story ring truer for us? And, ultimately, what is the meaning that we derive from the story because it is able to dialogue with our life?