

CHARACTERISTICS OF NOAH'S ARK

So, what did Noah's ark look like? The most complete description of it in the Bible comprises only three verses (Gen. 6:14-16), and it's not precise enough for a detailed reconstruction. But this handout focuses on some of the basic questions people ask about the ark.

WHAT IS AN ARK?

The Hebrew word *tebah* (ark) occurs in two Old Testament contexts. In Genesis 6-9 it describes Noah's boat. Then, in Exodus 2:3-5, the same word is used for the basket in which the infant Moses was placed. The word's etymology is uncertain, but its basic meaning seems to be something like "chest." It also may be related to an Egyptian word for "coffin" or "sarcophagus," and the biblical dimensions of the ark do indicate a coffin-like shape.

WHAT WAS ITS PURPOSE?

Noah's vessel may have been more like a buoyant box that floated than a ship that was navigated. In general, its sole purpose was to stay above water and keep its passengers alive.

WHAT WAS IT MADE OF?

The Bible says that the ark was constructed from "gopher wood" (Gen. 6:14), a term that appears only here in the entire Bible. Though this type of tree must have been familiar to Noah, no certainty exists as to what kind of tree it was. Interpreters have suggested teak or some kind of cypress as possibilities. The ark was also covered inside and outside with pitch. Because the Hebrew words for "pitch" and "gopher" are similar, many scholars think this waterproofing agent came from the trees used to build the ark.

HOW BIG WAS IT?

Older translations of the Bible measured the ark in cubits, and a cubit is roughly 18 inches in length. Using that scale, the ark was around 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet tall. That's taller than a four-story building and roughly the space equivalent of 569 railroad stock cars. As noted, most scholars believe the ark was basically flat and rectangular, which would have served its purposes well.

WHAT ELSE IS UNUSUAL ABOUT THE ARK?

The ark had four basic design elements: rooms, a window, a door, and decks. We don't know exactly how many rooms the ship had (Gen. 6:14), but most of them were probably more like pens to keep the animals. It is reasonable to assume they were different sizes depending on what animals were kept there.

The ark only had one window, which many scholars think was a wide opening about a cubit (18 inches) from the ark's roof—possibly to let in light and fresh air. It also only had one door (6:16), which God Himself shut before the flood came (7:16). Finally, the Bible says that the ark had three decks: lower, middle, and upper (6:16). Technically, no Hebrew word for "decks" appears in the original language, but the context of God's instructions implies three levels. The animals were probably kept at the top level, where the window could give them light and air. The lower decks might have been used to store food and supplies.

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