

**A Symbolic Interpretation of  
Noah and his Ark  
Presented to Golden State College, SRICF**

“Noah – *Son Japhet, of what was the Ark a type? Japhet – The church of God.*”<sup>1</sup>

“(The Ark is) emblematical of that divine Ark which safely wafts us over this tempestuous sea of troubles . . . .”<sup>2</sup>

The references to the *Ark* in Masonic ritual clearly imply its symbolic nature, albeit with different usage and intent. But popular culture is imbued with several literal notions, which must be explored and understood, in order to make sense of Noah and his Ark: 1) That there was an actual, physical Ark; 2) that there was an event of world-wide inundation; 3) that there was a man named Noah, who lived 950 years.

It is not necessary to take these notions literally in order to derive value from the scriptural account of Noah and his Ark. However, it can be counterproductive *not* to appreciate its symbolic significance. Great literature always operates on several levels – in this case, at least on the external and the internal. The ‘external’ level is the literal and has value in drawing men to God. But it is counterproductive when it draws those men to waste time looking for remnants of the supposed ‘actual’ Ark rather than delving deeper into the internal or symbolic meaning of the scripture. The Royal Ark Mariner ritual regards the Ark as a “type of the church of God.” Taken together with the Ark as an hieroglyphical emblem of the Third Degree, we learn that the church, representing Faith and Love, can provide us the capacity to endure and overcome the figurative ‘sea of troubles,’ the inundation or tempest of trials and tribulations which “flesh is heir to.” Hence, the figurative or symbolic essence is much more interesting and valuable to us than the mere, speculative history about a physical Ark, and the animals, and the rainbow.

As with the physical Ark, the Flood, also, is problematic. Inundations have undoubtedly occurred over the millennia, as reported or recounted in many cultures and civilizations. Could some wise individual or individuals at those times have prepared for certain catastrophes under inspiration by Deity? No doubt. But it seems more speculative than reasonable to suppose or imagine a 500 year old man doing so. If we take the story literally can we also assume that he had *only* three sons – and, if more than three, that his other children were doomed along with the rest of humanity? Probably not – and if not, we have an embedded clue as to how to interpret the story – viz., figuratively, not literally. And though there were certainly catastrophic inundations, must they have annihilated *all* living creatures above land, except the noted few?

And what are we to make of the great ages of the immediate descendants of Adam? Did Noah actually live to the ripe old age of 950 (Genesis 9:29)? Again, we have internal evidence that he did not. In Genesis 6:3 “...the LORD said, My spirit shall not always

strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.” But in Genesis 9:28 we learn “...Noah lived after the flood 350 years.” And in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis and beyond, we learn of Shem living 600 years (11:11), Arphaxad 438 years (11:13), Salah 433 years (11:15), Eber 464 years (11:17), Peleg 239 years (11:19), Terah 205 years (11:32), Abraham 175 years (25:7), and Jacob 147 years (47:28). So for many, many generations the span of man, set by the LORD at 120 years, was not enforced! Again, this is another clue that scripture is not as it seems; that sometimes it must be taken figuratively *only* and not literally. But what can this confusing linguistic condition possibly symbolize?

Emanuel Swedenborg,<sup>3</sup> the 18<sup>th</sup> Century theologian has offered a basis for interpretation: “While the mind cleaves to the literal sense alone, no one can possibly see that such things are contained within it. Thus in these first chapters of Genesis, nothing is discoverable from the sense of the letter other than that the creation of the world is treated of, and the garden of Eden which is called Paradise, and Adam as the first created man. Who supposes anything else? But it will be sufficiently established in the following pages that these matters contain arcana which have never yet been revealed; and in fact that the first chapter of Genesis in the internal sense treats in general of the new creation of man, or of his regeneration, and specifically of the Most Ancient Church; and this in such a manner that there is not the least expression which does not represent, signify, and enfold within it these things.” (Arcana Coelestia, n. 4)

So, though we do not discount the literal meaning, unless internal biblical evidence suggests we should (as with the span of man set at 120 years), we do focus on the *internal* signification of scripture, or its *symbolic* intent. In like manner, in our daily lives we emphasize our soul-life, but not at the expense of our external, physical life. In short, we can have both – the literal and the symbolic, the external and the internal, the physical and the spiritual. But Swedenborg insists that the names in the genealogy of Genesis are symbols of churches.<sup>4</sup> “Thus by Adam in paradise they perceive the Most Ancient Church, yet not that church, but the faith in the Lord of that church. By Noah they perceive the church that remained with the descendants of the Most Ancient Church, and that continued to the time of Abram. By Abraham they by no means perceive that individual, but a saving faith, which he represented; and so on.”<sup>5</sup>

Swedenborg saw that this sequence of “churches” represented by the patriarchs of Genesis was in a continuing state of decline, from the celestial nature of the church of Adam, to the spiritual church of Noah being a sort of re-constituted church of Adam, replacing the progressively more worldly versions that intervened. In Swedenborg’s conception, then, there have been four major iterations of churches: Adam, the Most Ancient Church; Noah, the Ancient Church; Hebrew/Israeli; and the Christian. He does not provide much detail distinguishing these various churches, or the numerous gradations between them. But he does use Faith/Knowledge/Wisdom/Understanding, and Love/Charity as the two major elements of distinction, along with the ability of each inhabitant to perceive nature, heaven, hell, and deity, and to distinguish the material from the spiritual.

Hence, we should understand Noah not as an individual but as a symbol of a church, a certain set of doctrine and perceptual capability. Likewise, his sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Not that there did not live certain personages that gave rise to the ‘churches’ bearing their names. Nor that there were not specific and special events associated with the birth of those churches. In this context and with this understanding, we are able to plumb the depths of Scripture for spiritual understanding and not be manipulated by modern over-simplifications.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian philosopher Ouspensky gives a similar interpretation in “A New Model of the Universe,” where he treats the progressive decline of the Most Ancient Church, through a series of ‘churches,’ (or what might be called ‘periods’ of doctrinal decline), as the decline of civilization in general.

“*The Great Flood* is an allegory of the fall of civilization, of the destruction of culture. Such a fall must be accompanied by the annihilation of the greater part of the human race as a consequence of geological upheavals, of wars, of the migration of human masses, epidemics, revolutions, or similar causes. Very often all these causes coincide. The idea of the allegory is that at the moment of the apparent destruction of everything, that which is really valuable is saved according to a plan previously prepared and thought out. A small group of men escapes from the general law and saves all the most important ideas and attainments of the given culture.

“The legend of Noah's Ark is a myth referring to esotericism. The building of the ‘Ark’ is the ‘School’ — the preparation of men for initiation, for transition to a new life, for new birth. "Noah's Ark", which is saved from the Flood, is the inner circle of humanity.

“The second meaning of the allegory refers to individual man. The flood is death, unavoidable, inexorable. But man can build within himself an ‘Ark’ and assemble in it *specimens* of everything that is valuable in him. In such a case these specimens will not perish. They will survive death and be born again. Just as mankind can be saved only through its connection with the inner circle, so an individual man can attain personal ‘salvation’ only by means of a link with the inner circle in himself, that is, by connecting himself with the higher forms of consciousness. This cannot be done without outside help, that is, without the help of the ‘inner circle’.”<sup>6</sup>

And so this legend demonstrates its richness and depth, with interpretations on several levels – the rise and fall of churches; the fall of civilization; the life and death of individuals. Perhaps in its most profound sense, it can be construed in much the same way as King Solomon’s Temple, as Ouspensky suggests, as a representation of the Temple of his Life that each Mason is building.

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<sup>1</sup> Poseidon Royal Ark Mariner Lodge Demonstration Ritual, Siminoff Council 485, AMD, 2010

<sup>2</sup> California Monitor and Officers Manual, The Heiroglyphical Emblems, p. 40.

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<sup>3</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg was born Emanuel Swedberg on Jan. 29, 1688, in Uppsala. His father, Bishop Jesper Swedberg, was a professor at the University of Uppsala. The family name was changed in 1719 to Swedenborg when the family was ennobled. After studies at the University of Uppsala, where he concentrated on mathematics and astronomy, Swedenborg traveled for 5 years throughout Europe (1710-1714). After a 2-year period in which he engaged in scientific journalism, Swedenborg became assessor at the Royal College of Mines in 1716. For the next 30 years, Swedenborg's main work was concentrated in the Swedish metal-mining industry. His engineering skill earned him a wide reputation. From 1747 onward, he devoted most of his time to the acquisition of knowledge through traveling and observation and to the elaboration and publication of scientific and theological theories.

Throughout his career in mining, Swedenborg studied and wrote. In 1718 Swedenborg published the first Swedish work on algebra. In 1721 he issued a voluminous work in which he attempted to demonstrate the geometrical character of physics and chemistry. Swedenborg spent the next 13 years researching and writing a three-volume work on the nature of physics, *Opera philosophica et mineralia*, published at Leipzig in 1734. He conceived of the atom as a particle vortex, each particle being composed of its own inner motions. This theory approximated the electron-nucleus framework of the atom in modern physics. Swedenborg reasoned from a general principle of matter, in which he thought of the infinite as pure motion. He conceived of pure motion as a tendency to create, and any subsequent molding of creation became a complex of pure motion. After the publication of his work on physics, Swedenborg's studies and researches focused on man as a physiological and anatomical whole and on man in his relationship to God. His new studies led to the publication of two works: *Oeconomia regni animalis* (1740-1741) and *Regnum animale* (1744-1745). Some of Swedenborg's physiological discoveries were important. He was among the first to discover the nature of cerebrospinal fluid. He identified the correspondence between particular parts of the body and certain motor regions of the cerebral cortex. His studies of the physiology of the blood, brain, lung, and heart led him to characterize correctly the relationship between these organs. He also attempted to describe the physiological basis for human perception and thus to find a way to define and describe man's soul.

After these studies Swedenborg devoted his energies to the philosophy of theology. Although not a theologian in the strict sense, he was an outstanding philosopher or theological speculator. Utilizing some basic Christian truths, Swedenborg elaborated - partly on a scientific basis, partly on a philosophical basis - a theory of God, of man, and of divine revelation and redemption. On the basis of these theorizings, the Church of the New Jerusalem was founded in 1784.

Swedenborg did not himself found any church or sect. Although his reputation has been established on his theological theories, his greatness as a scientist and philosopher of nature probably exceeds his greatness as a theological speculator. The basis of Swedenborg's speculations was his assumption that the infinite was an indivisible power, a personal god indivisible in essence or power or person. He rejected the traditional Christian teaching of the Trinity.

A systematic presentation of Swedenborg's theology appeared in 1771 entitled *Vera Christiana religio*. He viewed all things as created by divine love and according to divine

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wisdom. Each material thing corresponded to a "spiritual form." Swedenborg thus achieved a modified Neoplatonism: all effects in the material world have spiritual causes and therefore a divine purpose.

Swedenborg analyzed the biblical books of Genesis and Exodus in his *Arcana coelestia* (1749-1756), and Revelation in his *Apocalypsis explicata* (1785-1789), the latter published posthumously. He elaborated the purely philosophical aspect of his reasoning in three major works: *De coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno* (1758), *Sapientia angelica de divino amore et de divina sapientia* (1763), and *Sapientia angelica de divina providentia* (1764).

Swedenborg's theory of redemption rejected any notion that Jesus Christ was in himself a divine person, but it held that the inmost soul of Jesus was divine. This divine soul had taken on a human form from Mary, and Jesus' human nature had been glorified by his exemplary life. By resisting all the temptations and ills of the powers of darkness, Jesus had opened a way for divine life to flow into all mankind. Man had become free to know truth and to be able to obey its dictates. Human salvation lay in this knowledge and obedience.

Swedenborg defended his theological speculation by claiming it resulted from a divine call. He maintained that he had received special light from God. He also maintained that all of his exegetical and philosophical treatises constituted a new revelation from God. Mankind must live according to this revelation in order to usher in a new age of reason and truth.

Swedenborg died in London on March 29, 1772. In 1908 the Swedish government requested that his remains be transferred to Uppsala Cathedral.

Source: <http://www.answers.com/topic/emanuel-swedenborg>

<sup>4</sup> **460.** This chapter treats specifically of the propagation of the Most Ancient Church through successive generations, almost to the flood.

**461.** The Most Ancient Church itself, which was celestial, is what is called "Man (*homo*)", and a "likeness of God" (verse 1).

**462.** A second church which was not so celestial as the Most Ancient Church, is called "Seth" (verses 2, 3).

**463.** A third church was called "Enosh" (verse 6); a fourth "Kenan" (verse 9); a fifth "Mahalalel" (verse 12); a sixth "Jared" (verse 15); a seventh "Enoch" (verse 18); and an eighth church "Methuselah" (verse 21).

**464.** The church called "Enoch" is described as framing doctrine from what was revealed to and perceived by the Most Ancient Church, which doctrine, although of no use at that time, was preserved for the use of posterity. This is signified by its being said that "Enoch" was no more, because God took him" (verses 22, 23, 24).

**465.** A ninth church was called "Lamech" (verse 25).

**466.** A tenth, the parent of three churches after the flood, was named "Noah". This church is to be called the Ancient Church (verses 28, 29).

**467.** "Lamech" is described as retaining nothing of the perception which the Most Ancient Church enjoyed; and "Noah" is described as a new church (verse 29).

*Arcana Coelestia, with reference in n. 460 above to Genesis Chapter 5*

<sup>5</sup> *Arcana Coelestia*, n.64

<sup>6</sup> *A New Model of the Universe*. P. D. Ouspensky, Vintage Books Edition, 1971, p. 52