

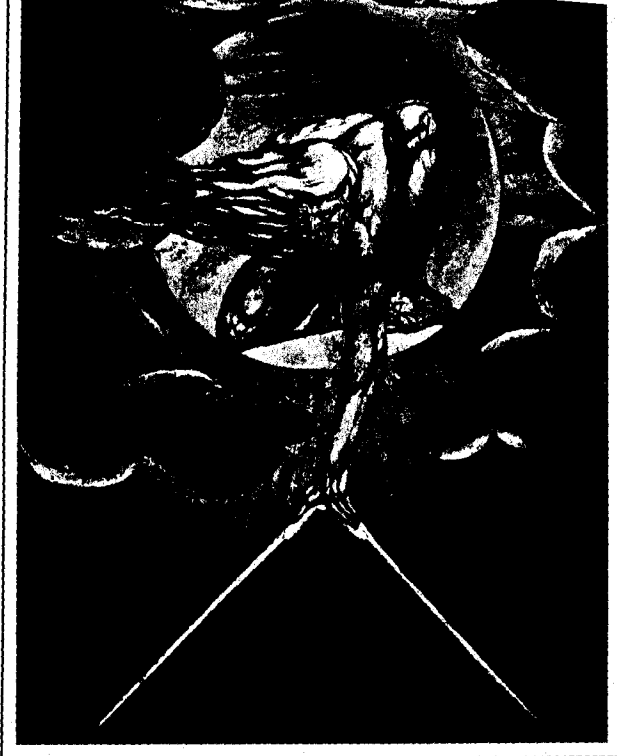
READER'S
DIGEST

Mysteries of the Bible



The Enduring
Questions
of the
Scriptures





"And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness."

Where time began

God speaks . . .

WHY ARE WE HERE? What are our origins? How can we understand our world? Down through the ages, religion, philosophy, and even science have delved into such mysteries, and the questions never cease to rise in the human heart.

In Genesis 1, the Bible confronts those fundamental mysteries and conveys a vision of God, the world, and humanity. The narrative is astoundingly peaceful—without the titanic battles characteristic of so many ancient accounts. The world in its magnificent order and goodness emerges from the creative word of God.

"In the beginning God created the heav-

ens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." Genesis begins with majestic prose that almost bursts into poetry. It evokes a sense of awe and wonder before the miracle of being.

In the first part of the creation drama, the stage is prepared for life. God created light and separated the light from the darkness of chaos (1:3-4). This was not the light of heavenly bodies, but a cosmic light which flashed at God's command. God named the light *day* and the darkness *night*. Genesis shows the mysteriousness of God's work, for time began before there was a sun to rise

... set. And there was evening and there was morning, one day."

On the second day (1:8), God created space. He separated "the waters (above) from the waters (below)" by placing a "firmament," a solid barrier, between them.

On the third day of creation, the waters were gathered together into bounded places (lakes and seas) and dry land appeared (1:9-13). Then God called on the mysterious fertility of the earth to take part in creation (1:11-13). "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth."

Then, on the fourth day, God created the luminaries (sun, moon, stars). They were created to "separate the day from the night," to mark times and seasons, and "to give light upon the earth." The sun, moon, and stars, Genesis emphasizes, are simply lights set in the firmament, and possess no divinity or power—traits many ancients often assigned to them. Vegetation, created on the previous day, is normally dependent upon the light and warmth of the sun. But in Genesis, light, time, and vegetation were brought into being by God's word; their existence is based on his continuing care.

On the fifth day, God created animal life, or *nefesh hayyah* ("living being"). A living being was characterized by breath, flesh, blood, mobility, and sexual reproduction. The latter was dependent on a special blessing from the Creator. These creatures were to live in lakes, streams, and oceans, while the birds would take to the sky.

On the sixth day, land animals and human beings were created. While all animals are considered equal, the Bible uses the Hebrew term *adam* to describe humankind. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth . . ." (1:26). The story stresses the close relation between animals and humans, who were created on the same day. Man's dominion was to be benevolent and peaceful, and until the time of Noah, he was

only to eat the plants of the earth. God said, "And to . . . everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" (1:30).

The seventh day, the Sabbath (a word based on a Hebrew verb for "rest"), was declared to be holy or sacred time; a time that belongs especially to God. The Sabbath was "hidden in creation" only to be disclosed to the people of Israel later at Mount Sinai. This day of worship was to endow all other days with meaning.

The hallowing of the Sabbath at the very climax and conclusion of the creation story suffuses the whole account with the atmosphere of worship. It also provides an invitation to human beings to give praise to their Creator, even as other creatures do by living as God ordained.

The creation story has some parallels in earlier myths and legends that were recited in the temples of the ancient world—in Babylonia, Egypt, Canaan. One of the best known of these ancient myths is the Babylonian creation epic, known by its opening words, *Enuma elish* ("When above . . ."). According to this myth, the universe was created after a fierce struggle between the creator god and the powers of chaos, which were symbolized by a monster of the deep, variously called Tiamat, Leviathan, or Yamm ("Sea"). The body of the slain monster was divided, forming a barrier between the watery parts, thereby making a space between the celestial and terrestrial water.

There are distinct differences between

On reading the Bible

"The greatness of it [the Bible] lies just in the fact that it is a mystery—that the passing earthly show and the eternal verity are brought together in it. In the face of the earthly truth, the eternal truth is accomplished. . . . What a book the Bible is, what a miracle, what strength is given with it to man. It is like a mould cast of the world and man and human nature, everything is there, and a law for everything for all the ages."

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky
The Brothers Karamazov

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD



The fourth day of Creation, in a woodcut from an old Venetian Bible.

Firmament

The second day of Creation begins with God's enigmatic command, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters." What is a "firmament"? This little-used English word is a translation of the Hebrew word *raqia*, but it captures little of the color of the original. The Hebrew *raqia* derives from the verb *raqa*, meaning to beat out or hammer out, and it conveys the vivid image of a metal surface hammered out like a copper or golden bowl.

God used this solid expanse to divide the waters of chaos from the lower waters of the earth. God called the solid dome "heaven," connoting "the skies." As the Book of Job observed, God "spread out the skies, hard as a molten mirror" (Job 37:18). It was in this dome that God set the sun, moon, and stars, and across this firmament that the birds flew (Genesis 1:17; 20). Under the firmament God pronounced the creation good; above it lay chaotic waters that could pour through the windows of heaven to destroy creation. Thus, the mighty firmament, visible day and night as the dome of heaven above the earth, proclaimed the glory and "handiwork" of God (Psalm 19:2). The world was enclosed and protected, since God's immeasurable power had spread the heavens "like a tent to dwell in" (Isaiah 40:22).

these myths and the Genesis creation story. For one thing, Genesis deals with the mystery of the beginning of all things. God created a habitable world out of chaos. Thus, the universe was created in God's purpose, even as it will end with the consummation of God's purpose.

Prevailing scientific theory proposes that the universe was created in a flash of light. This "big bang," or cosmic explosion, is believed to have occurred some 16 billion years ago. Some see parallels between this modern, scientific theory and the biblical account which opens with God's command, "Let there be light."

Repeatedly the creation story is punctuated with the refrain, "God saw that it was good," and over the whole stands God's final evaluation: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (1:31).

The Creator not only originated, but also constantly maintains the cosmos. In the Genesis story, the waters of chaos were not eliminated, but were only pushed back and assigned their proper boundaries so that the dry land might appear and creatures might exist. The habitable world is surrounded on all sides by these waters, which are held in check by the Creator's power.

Were God's sustaining power to be withheld, as in the flood story, the chaotic waters would surge in through "the windows of the heavens" and spring up from "the fountains of the great deep." The "laws" of nature are manifestations of God's dependability or "covenant faithfulness," as expressed in his pledge to Noah at the end of the Deluge: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22).

When the psalmists read Genesis they were filled with awe at the grandeur of creation. They wrote poems extolling God's handiwork. These were meant to be read alongside Genesis, and they ask the reader to celebrate the joy of creation and the mastery of Yahweh. Psalm 90 exclaims: "from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." ♦

word *paradeisos* to mean "garden"—hence the description of Eden as "paradise."

The garden was filled with trees, some of which provided food. At the center of the garden were the mysterious tree of life and the fateful tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Yahweh forbade man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:17). Genesis does not explain why the knowledge of good and evil should be forbidden to man. Perhaps the fateful tree simply expressed God's mastery over his creation, and man's duty to obey him.

From the beginning, man was a worker whose task was to till and maintain the garden. But Adam was alone. "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Genesis 2:18). Yahweh formed the beasts and birds and brought them to man so that he could name them. Adam gave names to all the creatures, but no fit helper was found for him.

Finally, Yahweh caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, the Lord God took one of Adam's ribs and formed woman. Yahweh led the woman to the man, who said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (*ishshah*) because she was taken out of Man (*ish*)" (Genesis 2:23).

Genesis implied that the attraction between man and woman was a result of the original unity between male and female. Genesis stated, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." It is remarkable that although the actual practice in most ancient patriarchal cultures, including Israel, was for the woman to leave her family and join the clan of her husband, the reverse was decreed here.

Man and woman were naked and unashamed, thus symbolizing the innocence of Eden and their pure relation to God. Within a short time, however, man and woman encountered the serpent.

Although in later centuries the serpent was seen as demonic and was identified

ADAM LEFT HIS FATHER & MOTHER



The beguiling serpent tempted Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge, saying that "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."

The bizarre lineage of mankind

Seth, Enoch, and the giants

AFTER MURDERING his brother Abel, Cain became a fugitive. He founded a city, and had numerous descendants—it is noted that these included musicians and metalsmiths and those who dwell in tents and have cattle (Genesis 4:17-22). But this fugitive murderer was not to be the ancestor of the rest of mankind.

Adam and Eve had a third son named Seth, and through him came "the generations of Adam" that continue the biblical story. Among these descendants, the name of Enoch stands out. "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). Many interpreters have taken that statement to mean that Enoch did not die. The possibility that he did not die provided a mystery for later generations.

In the second century B.C., the Book of Jubilees reported that Enoch was "conducted into the Garden of Eden in majesty and honor, and behold there he writes down the

condemnation and judgment of the world." Numerous apocalyptic writings were attributed to him, and in some, he was perceived as the angel closest to God.

Genesis also reported that "the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose." From these marriages were born the *Nephilim*, or "giants," also known as "the mighty men that were of old." This mysterious statement was taken up in later apocalyptic writing. In one of the books that has been attributed to Enoch, for example, the "sons of God" were seen as fallen angels. These angels corrupted the earth and produced evil giant children.

According to Genesis, the birth of the giants was an indication of how wicked the earth had become. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great . . . so the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground.'" †

Corrupt humanity drowns in the flood

Why Noah was saved

THE STORY OF NOAH and his family, riding out the flood in an ark filled with birds and other animals, is among the Bible's most cherished episodes. At the same time, the description of the cataclysmic inundation that covered the earth is among the most terrifying.

Ten generations after the creation of Adam and Eve, God announced his intention to erase all life from the earth and start anew. Humanity had grown corrupt, so much so that God resolved to unleash a flood that would destroy mankind.

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was

sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Genesis 6:5-6). Man, granted free will to live either righteously or wickedly, had chosen the evil path. What sins had been committed?

Corruption and violence—the breakdown of human society—were what sealed the world's fate. According to the Bible, even the lower animals were somehow guilty. "So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'" There was but one man who was "righteous . . . blameless in his generation," a man who "walked with God." This one man was Noah.

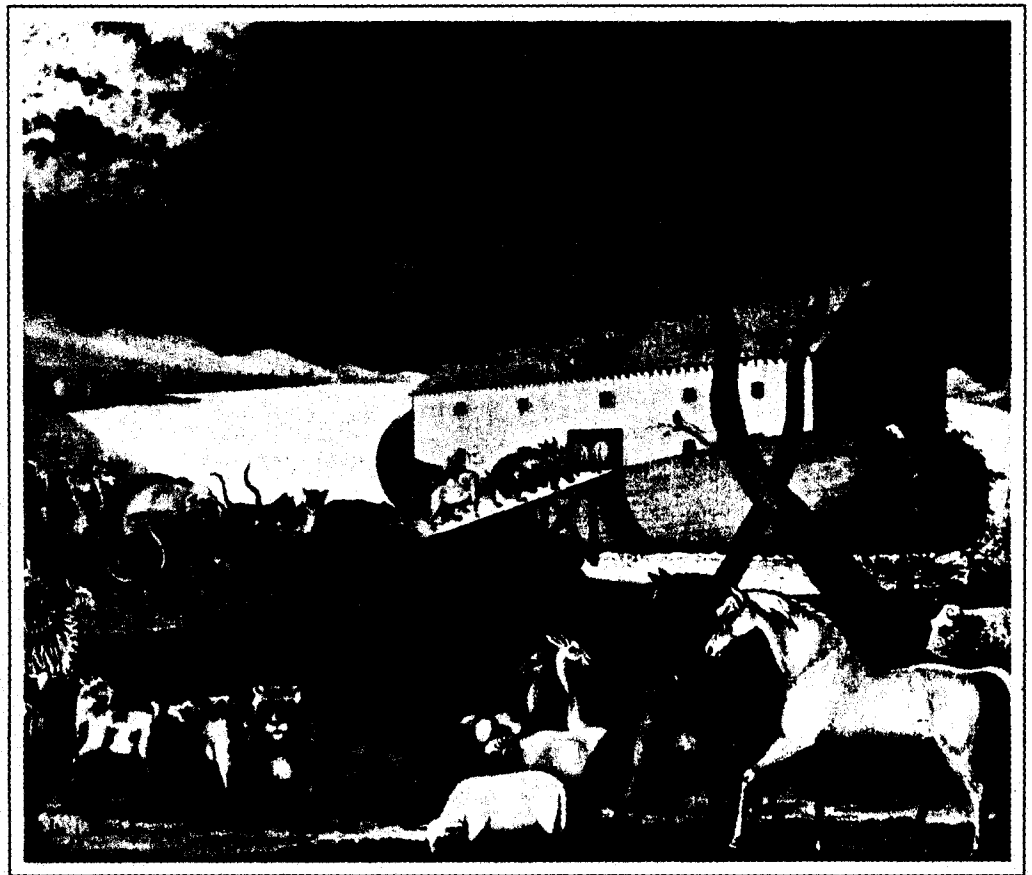
God told Noah of his intention to destroy the world, and instructed him, for his salvation, to build "an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch." God specified the dimensions of the ark, the need for three decks in it, and the location of the door. Only after giving these instructions did God explain: "For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven. . . . But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you" (Genesis 6:17-18).

In order to ensure the survival of all living species, Noah was to take into the ark seven pairs—male and female—of all animals and birds known in Israelite tradition as "clean" (permissible to eat), and one pair

each of all "unclean" creatures. He stocked the ark with food for all of them. Without comment, Noah "did all that the LORD had commanded him."

The coming of the flood is described graphically. "All the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened." As time went on, "the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. . . . And the waters prevailed so mightily upon the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered." Other than fish, all living creatures outside the ark drowned—"birds, cattle, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm upon the earth, and every man" (Genesis 7:11-21).

Archaeologists have found tantalizing evidence of flooding in the Mesopotamian area. In 1929, the English scientist Leonard



Charged with care of man and beast, Noah built the ark according to God's word.

Woolley, tunneling into a Sumerian burial pit at the site of Ur on the Euphrates, struck a layer of water-deposited silt, over eight feet thick, and below it the relics of an earlier, more primitive culture. Woolley declared that a great flood had swept through the region late in the fourth millennium B.C., wiping out the existing culture. Centuries later, he said, a new culture had taken shape on the site. Later researchers uncovered evidence of flooding at a number of other locations in Mesopotamia. Archaeologists believe, however, that these flood layers were formed during the third millennium B.C. Thus, scholars today reject Woolley's conclusion regarding the Great Flood.

It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Then God "made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth continually." After 150 days, the ark came to rest upon solid ground, on Mount Ararat—thought to be in modern Turkey.

Still, Noah did not know how much the flood waters had receded. So he opened the window and sent out a raven, which "went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth." He next released a dove, "but the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 8:9).

A week later, Noah again released the dove. This time, it brought back an olive branch, "so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth." The image of a dove clutching an olive branch has been a symbol of peace and harmony ever since. Waiting another week, Noah sent out the dove once more. It did not return.

When Noah opened the door of the ark, the world was once again pristine. All wickedness had been purged from it. God reiterated the command made to his original creation: Noah and his family, as well

as the surviving animals and birds, were to "be fruitful and multiply upon the earth." Noah expressed his thanks for the deliverance by offering sacrifices to God.

Later Jewish folklore, elaborating on the account with a wealth of detail, described the troubles Noah encountered with the animals in the ark. The patriarch and his sons labored day and night to feed them, hauling fodder for the zebras and gazelles, dried meat for the tigers and other carnivores. At one point, the lion, grumpy and seasick, bit Noah in the leg, laming him.

According to these legends, filth piled up and rats proliferated. Noah solved these problems by creating two new animals. Passing his hand over the elephant, he caused it to give birth to a pig, which soon devoured the filth. Then, when he rubbed the lion's nose, the beast produced a cat, which began to eliminate the rats. Special attention was given to two creatures too large for the ark to accommodate: a gigantic beast called the *reem* that swam behind, tethered by a rope; and the giant Og, who straddled the roof, and whose food was passed to him through a hatchway.

Interestingly, many cultures around the globe have preserved ancient folklore about a primeval flood that destroyed everything and everyone except one lucky man, or one chosen family. Many people today believe that the very universality of such sagas proves that they are based on fact. Others suggest that the existence of these traditions among so many different cultures illuminates a deep human fear of nature's destructive power.

One early version of the story comes from Babylon, located in what is now Iraq. It forms an episode in the classic *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its counterpart to Noah is Utnapishtim of Shuruppak. One night, as Utnapishtim slept, the god Ea whispered a warning through the reed walls of his house: Enlil, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon, was about to send a flood that would destroy humanity.



Assyrian relief of Gilgamesh.

Ea gave instructions for building an ark, and Utnapishtim arranged for its construction. He then embarked with his family and servants, a supply of silver and gold, and "the seeds of all living things." The rains came, the waters rose, and the storm raged six days and six nights. On the seventh day the ark came to rest on a mountaintop. The land below, shrouded in silt and debris, lay "flat like a roof," the chronicle states, "and all of mankind had returned to clay."

Utnapishtim opened a shutter and, to make sure that the earth was dry, released first a dove; then a swallow, and finally a raven. Then, on the mountaintop, he offered up a sacrifice to the gods. Enlil's rage was eventually appeased, and he conferred immortality on Utnapishtim and his wife.

The Gilgamesh narrative resembles an even older Babylonian source, which in turn is similar to an extremely ancient Sumerian text. A fragment of the Sumerian *Epic of Ziusudra*, written on a clay tablet, was excavated in 1890 in Nippur, holy city of Sumer.

Thus, many cultures preserved the story of a flood that killed all but a favored few. In addition, Bible scholars, closely examining the verses in Genesis, have noted some interesting patterns in the biblical text. The Genesis account may in fact derive from two separate sources that were pieced together to make a single story.

The first version, dating from around the time of King Solomon, reads like a folktale. Noah loaded the animals—seven pairs each of ritually acceptable animals and birds that the Israelites used in their sacrifices, and one pair apiece of the other animals. The rains fell just 40 days and 40 nights; when the flood subsided (this version does not

say where), Noah first sent out the raven and then the dove. Then, he went forth from the ark, and sacrificed to God.

The second, probably later, account is both more sweeping and more precise. In it, only single pairs of animals entered the ark. The narrative shows a careful concern for detail, giving Noah's age (600 years) and the lengthy duration of the flood. The deluge itself was not just a rainstorm, but a return to the primordial chaos of creation, when God parted the waters to differentiate heaven from earth. The ark came to rest on Ararat. And when the crisis was ended, God established a covenant with Noah.

What is finally so marvelous about the biblical account is neither its literary value nor its historicity, but its moral force. Indeed, Genesis raises the story to new levels of dramatic power and moral insight.

The Bible story is concerned not only with the salvation of the world that occurs after the cataclysm, but also with moral law. God resolved that he would never "again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease" (8:21-22).

God then provided other means to deal with corruption and violence. Whoever was guilty—man or beast—would be punished individually for his crime. God told Noah and his family, "for your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed." God set forth a theological basis for the significance of every human life: "for God made man in his own image." Thus, whoever spills blood attacks God.

God then established a covenant with Noah, which extended to all of his progeny—all people forever after. He promised that he would never destroy the world by a flood again. A rainbow in the sky symbolized this pledge: "when the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant." Upon emerging from the ark, Noah began to till the soil. †

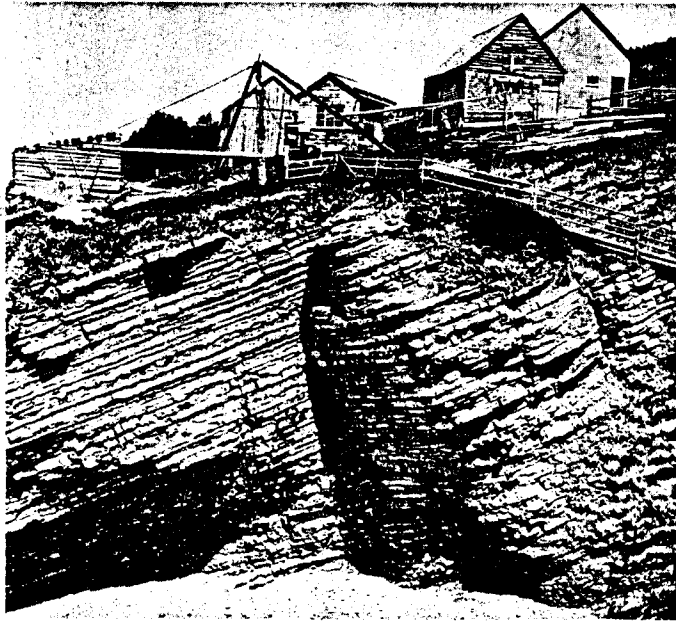


On the search for Noah's Ark

"Does it make a difference really if the ark is found? By now it is immortal. If it did not find refuge in the heart of this mountain [today called Mt. Ararat], it has found a safer refuge in the human heart. Here it has lived for thousands of years, and here it will live forever."

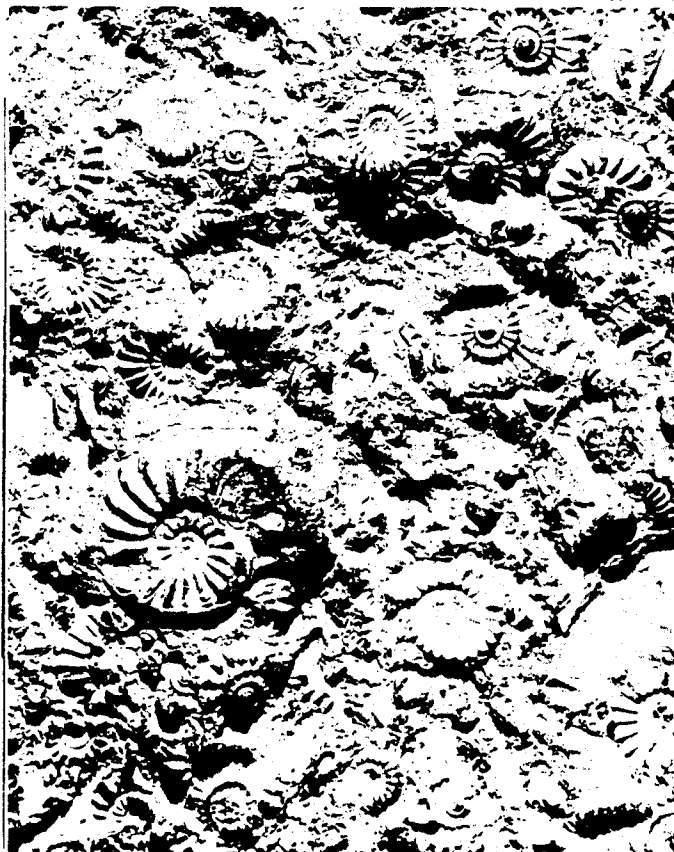
—Gordon Gaskill

"Have They Found Noah's Ark?"



Lyn. APF

Rocks Tell the Earth's History. Tilted layers of rock, above, show that this hillside was once a level plain. A piece of limestone, below, formed more than 100 million years ago, contains fossils of snail-like sea animals that have since died out. WORLD BOOK photo courtesy the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago



The history of the earth is recorded in the rocks that make up the earth's crust. Rocks have been forming, wearing away, and re-forming ever since the earth took shape. This continual changing of rocks has resulted in the formation of layers of rock called *strata*. Strata contain many clues that tell geologists what the earth was like in the past. These clues include the thickness and position of the layers, the chemicals that make them up, and the fossils they contain.

Geologists base their explanations of rock clues on their observations of the earth today. They assume that the laws of chemistry and physics have remained unchanged, and that such forces as gravitation have operated continuously. Geologists also assume that the earth has developed in the past in the same way it is developing now. This idea was first proposed by James Hutton, a Scottish scientist, in 1785 (see HUTTON, JAMES). It is now called the *principle of uniformitarianism*.

Geologists know that some rock strata were once hot and liquid because hot, liquid lava from volcanoes hardens and forms layers of rock. Geologists also know that erosion supplied the materials from which other strata were made because erosion produces layers of *sediment* (bits of rock and soil). If a slab of rock has a rippled surface, geologists assume that the rock was once mud or sand at the bottom of a body of water. They make this assumption because they still find such ripples on the bottoms of streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Geologists can even tell which way the current once flowed by the shape of the ripples in the rock.

Many rocks contain fossils that reveal the history of life on earth. A fossil may be an animal's body, a tooth, or a piece of bone. It may simply be an outline of a plant or an animal made in a rock when the rock was soft mud or liquid lava. The study of fossils is called *paleontology*, and scientists who collect and study fossils are *paleontologists*.

Fossils help geologists figure out the ages of rock strata and the times at which animals and plants lived. Fossils of the simplest animals and plants are found in the oldest strata. The youngest strata contain fossils of animals and plants much like those living today. See EVOLUTION.

Fossils also are clues to changes that have taken place on the earth. For example, paleontologists find fossil seashells in strata high in a mountain, many miles from an ocean. These discoveries indicate that the strata formed a muddy ocean bottom long before the rocks were lifted to form a mountain.

Rocks contain only an incomplete history of the earth. Many rocks—together with their geological records—are destroyed or changed by heat and pressure deep in the earth's crust, or by weathering at the surface. In addition, geological clues in rocks help describe conditions on the earth only at the time the rocks hardened. Geologists have learned the story of the earth's development by piecing together clues from rocks of many ages. But the complete history of the earth will probably never be known.

The known history of the earth is divided into six lengths of time called *eras*. The eras are, from oldest to youngest: Azoic, Archeozoic, Proterozoic, Paleozoic,