

The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON XXXIII : GENESIS 6: 13–16 – THE FLOOD: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ARK

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE — Along with my usual references, this and the following Flood lessons will be using much material from ‘*Grappling with the Chronology of the Genesis Flood*,’ Steven W. Boyd & Andrew A. Snelling, editors; Master Books, Green Forest AR; first printing 2014; sixth printing 2022. The translation used in these next few studies will be from this resource.

Episode 1, Scene 3: Genesis 6:13-16; **Theme:** *God’s announcement of His intent to destroy the earth and His precise instructions to Noah for the construction of the Ark.*

¹³ And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh is coming before Me, for the earth is full of violence because of them. Now indeed I am about to destroy them with the earth.”¹⁴ Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; with compartments you will make the ark and cover it inside and outside with pitch.¹⁵ And this is how you shall make it: three hundred cubits shall be the length of the ark; fifty cubits shall be its width; and thirty cubits shall be its height.¹⁶ A covering you shall make for the ark, and you shall finish it to within a cubit from the top. And the door of the ark you shall put in its side. With a lower, second, and third deck you shall make it.

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation:

*v. 13 – And God said to Noah,
‘An end of all flesh / I have determined to make;
for the earth is filled / with unrighteousness through them;
and behold, I am about to destroy them / with the earth.
v. 14 – Make yourself / an ark of gopher wood;
rooms / make in the ark,
and cover it / inside and out / with pitch.
v. 15 – This / is how you are to make it;
three hundred cubits / the length of the ark,
fifty cubits its breadth, / and thirty cubits its height.
v. 16 – A window / make for the ark,
and to a cubit / finish it above;
and the door of the ark / set in its side;
with lower, second, and third decks / make it.*

THE STRUCTURE — “It is important to grasp the structure of the divine speech.

A 13 God’s proposed action: to destroy world

B 14-16 Hence, command to Noah to build ark

A¹ 17-20 God’s plan further explained

B¹ 21 Hence, command to Noah to victual the ark.” [Wenham, 1:171; ‘victual’ = provide with food or other stores)

v. 13 – And God said to Noah, — This is not an unnecessary repetition of 6:7; there the Bible tells us of God’s decision, here is its announcement to Noah. This is in contrast with the Babylonian Flood account where the gods keep their decisions secret from any person. We do not know how this communication occurs. Interestingly nowhere does Noah speak; as a matter of fact, his first recorded words in Scripture are ‘*cursed be Canaan*’ (9:25)! Noah is silent in his ship-building project and throughout the ensuing storm; we do not know how he feels and what he thinks. ***This narrative has no hint of any dialogue. God speaks, Noah implements.***

The explanation for God’s actions begins with a summing up of the situation described in vv. 11-12. The same terms – ‘*the earth,*’ ‘*full of violence,*’ ‘*ruin*’ – reappear. But now Noah is told of God’s assessment and of the divine plan to end ‘*all flesh*’ and ‘*ruin them with the earth.*’ ***It is for this reason he must build the ark and gather animals together for their survival. The Lord is not acting impulsively or selfishly but in moral outrage against the reprehensible conduct of that generation.*** [Mathews, 1:362f; Wenham, 1:172; Hamilton, 1:280]

“The end of all flesh is coming before Me, — “The phrasing of the divine decree ‘The end of all flesh has been determined by me’ (literally, ‘come before me’), suggests its irrevocability. The issue has been brought before the divine king and he has decided to act (cf. Esth 9:11).... It should also be noted how Ezek 7 echoes the terminology of this verse (‘end,’ ‘violence,’ ‘coming,’ ‘is full’) in announcing the fall of Jerusalem.” [Wenham, 1:172]

for the earth is full of violence because of them. — “This is the reason for the decree of destruction. The earth is filled with unrighteousness; therefore it follows that the unrighteousness must be removed from its midst and the world must be remoulded. Since the unrighteousness comes ‘through,’ that is, ‘on account of,’ mankind, justice demands that they who brought about this situation should receive their punishment.” [Cassuto, 2:57] In both 6:13 and 7:1, an explanation is given for the Lord’s actions: ‘*For (kî) the earth is filled with violence*’ (6:13) and ‘*because (kî) I have found you righteous*’ (7:1).

Now indeed I am about to destroy them with the earth. — Or, ‘*together with the earth.*’ There is a wordplay of ‘*destroy*’ (*mash^echîth*) in v. 13 with ‘*corrupted*’ (*hish^echîth*) in v. 12: ‘*they destroyed their way, therefore, I shall destroy them; the earth was destroyed on account of them, therefore I shall destroy also it with them.*’ ***This is a clear case of a punishment fitting the crime; the ‘lex talionis’ is obvious here. ‘I am about to ruin them’ also highlights the immediacy and certainty of the coming judgment; ‘I am about to’ plus participle is most often used to announce an imminent divine judgment or blessing.*** [Mathews, 1:362; Wenham, 1:172; Keil, 1:142]

v. 14 – Make for yourself — ***Here is the only imperative in the first divine speech.*** What follows through v. 22 is an amplification of this command, vv. 14-16 how to build the Ark and vv. 17-21 what to do after the Ark is finished. ***The Lord specifies the construction of the Ark, just as He specified the construction of His tabernacle and its furnishings (Exod 25-31), suggesting both were seen as a sanctuary for His people. He does not entrust the means of salvation to human imagination.*** [Wenham, 1:172; Hamilton, 1:280; Waltke, 135]

an ark — Hebrew, *tēvhāh* , a loan-word of Egyptian origin denoting originally ‘*box, coffin, a chest.*’ Undoubtedly the Biblical narrative refers to a vessel rectangular in shape, possibly flat bottomed and square at the ends. It was a floating barge that was designed to provide shelter and orderly existence for a variety of creatures rather than a ship for sailing. The narrative does not mention a rudder nor navigational aids; Noah trusted the hand of God as its rudder (by contrast, the hero of a Mesopotamian parallel employed a boatsman to navigate). The LXX has κιβωτὸν

(kibōton, ‘a wooden box or chest’). We get our word ‘ark’ from the Latin vulgate ‘*arca*,’ meaning ‘box, chest, coffin.’

THIS SAME WORD IS USED OF MOSES’ BASKET — This Hebrew word is used twenty-six times in the Flood narrative (6:14-9:18) and only two more times in Scripture: in the salvation of baby Moses where it is translated ‘basket’ (Exod 2:3, 5; another word is used for the ark of the covenant, ^arôn). *Thus two remarkable persons in Scripture are saved from the destruction of water by being placed in an ‘ark’ to introduce a new era in the Lord’s work among his people. “This is certainly no coincidence. By the verbal parallel, the Torah wished, apparently, to draw attention to the parallelism of theme. In both cases there is to be saved from drowning one who is worthy of salvation and is destined to bring deliverance to others; here it is humanity that is to be saved, there it is the chosen people; here it is the macrocosm that has to be preserved, there it is the microcosm. The experiences of the fathers foreshadow the history of their descendants.* Hence, similar expressions occur in both sections: here it is stated, ‘Make yourself an ark of gopher wood ... and cover it, inside and out, with pitch;’ there it is written, ‘she took for him a basket [the same word as for ark] made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch.’ The difference in the materials used is due to the difference of locality, custom and the beings to be saved: there it is a child, and here it is a complete family of people together with a great number of creatures. Here it is written, ‘Make yourself,’ because a huge ark of the requisite dimensions was certainly not ready to hand; there it says, ‘she took for him,’ because small baskets of bulrushes could be obtained ready-made in Egypt. But the essential point is identical: each passage speaks of a *tēvhāh* ; the parallelism is therefore clear.” [Cassuto, 2:59]

of gopher wood; — The building material in the construction of the ark is not named for the animal but rather is the transliteration of the Hebrew word *gōpher* . It is an obscure term, not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament and therefore difficult to identify. Many commentators say it was cedar (also, *Targum Onqelos*); the LXX translates it as ‘*squared timber*’ and the Latin Vulgate has ‘*smoothed timber*.’ The NIV opts for ‘*cypress*’ because of the similar consonants with the Hebrew (c/g-p-r) and because the ancients used it in their shipbuilding due to its resistance to rot. It may denote any resinous wood which is at the same time light and firm. Ken Ham [179] suggests it may not even be a kind of tree that is around today. Some people think the name might refer to a process to make wood harder, like laminating or burying, as the Chinese once did to harden teak.

with compartments you will make the ark — Hebrew, *qinnîm* , ‘*nests*.’ The vessel was to consist internally of an unspecified number of ‘*compartments, dwellings, rooms, cells*.’

and cover it inside and outside with pitch. — Hebrew, *kōpher* . The ark was to be sealed inside and out with ‘pitch’ as was Moses’ basket of safety (Exod 2:3). The word for ‘pitch’ is different from that used in other places in the Old Testament. *It is equivalent to the Hebrew kāpher (‘to cover’) and, in the noun form, means simply a ‘covering,’ closely related to the Hebrew for ‘atone(ment)’ (Lev 17:11). This may be more than a happy verbal coincidence (well suited to a story of judgment and salvation); we could say that just as the blood of the Lamb provides a perfect atonement for our souls, so this pitch was a perfect covering for the Ark to keep the waters of judgment out. In essence, therefore, this is the first mention of ‘atonement’ in the Bible.* Both Ken Ham and Henry Morris notes this ‘pitch’ was probably a resinous substance of some kind rather than a bituminous material. But whatever the exact nature of this may have been, it sufficed as a perfect covering for the Ark.

v. 15 – And this is how you shall make it: three hundred cubits shall be the length of the ark; fifty cubits shall be its width; and thirty cubits shall be its height.

— The dimensions are straight-forward; the only question is the length of a ‘cubit’ (Hebrew, ‘*ammāh*’). The ‘cubit’ was a measurement derived from the length of the elbow to the tip of the fingers but it varied in length among the peoples of the Near East, including the Hebrews (e.g., Deut 3:11; Ezek 40:5; 43:13). Most scholars today work with cubits measuring fifty cm. (19.8 inches) per cubit, but this cannot be verified since it is a modern approximation based on circumstantial evidence. Obviously when Noah exited the ark there was a single length for the cubit but after the nations were divided at the Tower of Babel, different cultures (people groups) adopted different sized cubits. Probably the people who settled near Babel would have retained or remained close to the cubit used by Noah, yet cubits from that region (the ancient Near East) are generally either a common (short) or a long cubit (see charts). In large-scale construction projects, it is believed ancient civilizations typically used the long cubit; but archaeological finds in Israel consistently reveal the use of a short cubit, such as was confirmed by archaeologists while measuring Hezekiah’s tunnel.

CULTURE	INCHES (CENTIMETERS)
Hebrew (short)	17.5 (44.5)
Egyptian	17.6 (44.7)
Common (short)	18 (45.7)
Babylonian (long)	19.8 (50.3)
Hebrew (long)	20.4 (51.8)
Egyptian (long)	20.6 (52.3)

So while the cubit length Noah used is uncertain, many believe the best analysis suggests the longer cubit is to be preferred. Using the longer cubit of about 20.4 inches, Noah’s Ark would have been about 510 feet long by 85 feet wide by 51 feet tall. These are the dimensions used by Ken Ham in the construction of the life-size Ark for the Ark Encounter Christian-themed attraction in Northern Kentucky, USA. Noah’s vessel was likely about this length, give or take a little. [Ham, 177ff; Mathews, 1:364] “It can be shown hydrodynamically that a gigantic box of such dimensions would be exceedingly stable, almost impossible to capsize.” [Morris, 181] In contrast to this was the Babylonian ‘ark’ which was a cube 120 cubits in each direction, something which would never had sustained a rough storm.

MINIMUM AND MAXIMUM SIZES OF NOAH’S ARK			
CUBIT LENGTH (inch / cm)	LENGTH = 300	WIDTH = 50	HEIGHT = 30
17.5 (44.5)	437.5 feet / 133.5 m	72.92 feet / 22.23 m	43.75 feet / 13.34 m
17.6 (44.7)	440 feet / 134.1 m	73.33 feet / 22.35 m	44 feet / 13.41 m
18 (45.7)	450 feet / 137.16 m	75 feet / 22.86 m	45 feet / 13.72 m
19.8 (50.3)	495 feet / 150.9 m	82.5 feet / 25.15 m	49.5 feet / 15.09 m
*20.4 (51.8)	510 feet / 155.46 m	85 feet / 25.91 m	51 feet / 15.55 m
20.6 (52.3)	515 feet / 156.99 m	85.83 feet / 26.17 m	51.5 feet / 15.7 m

* The cubit length used in the construction of the Ark at the Ark Encounter, Northern Kentucky USA

v. 16 – A covering you shall make for the ark, and you shall finish it to within a cubit from the top. — A difficult verse which provides a great many interpretations. The problem is that the

word translated here ‘*covering*’ is only used once so its meaning is disputed. Added to that is ‘*finish it to within a cubit from the top*’ (as translated here) could be understood a variety of ways. There is no doubt the ark was equipped with a window (8:6) and a roof (8:13), the questions relate to how this verse relates to those items.

covering — Hebrew, *tsōhar*, only used once in the Old Testament. The LXX has ἐπισυναγωγή (episunagōn, ‘*a gathering, to collect and bring to a place*’) which is of no help; Cassuto thinks perhaps because of a similar word used in Job 24:11. The Latin Vulgate has ‘*fenestram*’ meaning ‘*window*.’ Thoughts:

- Some Jews believe it to be a ‘**precious stone**’: “Some say it was a skylight – according to most commentators, it was the window Noah opened after the Flood (8:6) – and some say it was a precious stone [that refracted the outside light to illuminate the interior].” [Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, or The Five Books of Moses in book form (Mehorah Publications LTD, Brooklyn NY) 2011, page 31]
- One of the most favored understandings amongst the older translators and commentators is that of a ‘**window**’ based on it being mentioned in 8:6 [e.g., Cassuto, 2:63f; (Wycliffe 2001, Douay-Rheims 1899, Geneva 1599, KJV, NKJV, NASB, YLT, Amplified 2015, Legacy Standard Bible, Jubilee Bible, New Life Version, et. al.)]. This could be a single (square) aperture to allow light to enter [Skinner, 1:161]. But a different Hebrew word is used in 8:6, *challôn*; why would 6:16 use this unusual word if the same part is meant?
- Many modern commentators believe this to be a ‘**roof, covering**’ on the basis of Semitic cognates meaning ‘*back*’ along with the reference to a covering in 8:13 [e.g., Wenham, 1:173; (‘*roof*,’ ESV, RSV, Christian Standard Bible 2017, Common English Bible, Contemporary English Version 1992, Lexham English Bible, New Catholic Bible, New Revised Standard Bible, Orthodox Jewish Bible, Tree of Life Version, et. al.)] But the same objection as above is present here; a different Hebrew word is used in 8:13, *mikh^eseh*; why would 6:16 use this unusual word if it were a reference to the same covering? There is also a regular word for ‘*roof*’ in the Old Testament, *gagh*, which refers to a flat roof (e.g., Rahab hiding the two spies, Josh 2:6, 8; David walking on the roof when he saw Bathsheba, 2 Sam 11:2). Hamilton [1:282f] suggests this may be a different word because it refers to a pitched or vaulted roof instead of the flat-roofed *gagh* (would be less than ideal during a torrential downpour).
- The one that makes the most sense is ‘**light**’ [Keil, 1:142f; Mathews, 1:364f; (ASV, Darby, et. al.)], ‘**opening**’ [Morris, 182; Hamilton, 1:282; Kidner, 87f], ‘**light opening**’ [Lange, 1:298; (Complete Jewish Bible, et. al.)]. This is on the basis of the word’s possible connection with *tsāhorayim*, ‘*double-light, noon, midday*,’ thus a hole or something for light and air was to be so constructed as to reach within a cubit of the edge of the roof.

you shall finish it to within a cubit from the top — Going along with what we discovered above, a general consensus with many translations and commentators is that this was an opening surrounding the ark for light and air. Note the translations, even those who translates *tsōhar* as ‘*window*’ or ‘*roof*’ rather than ‘*opening*’:

‘*Make a window for the boat about 1 cubit below the roof.*’ (Easy-to-Read Version)

‘*Make a roof for the ark and finish it, leaving 18 inches from the top.*’ (NET)

‘*Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around.*’ (NIV)

‘*You are to make a roof, finishing the sides of the ark to within 18 inches of the roof.*’

(Holman Christian Standard Bible)

'Make an opening around the top of the boat [probably a window] that is eighteen inches [a cubit] high from the edge of the roof down.' (The Expanded Bible)

'Make a roof for it. Leave below the roof an opening all the way around that is a foot and a half high.' (New International Reader's Version)

'Make a roof for the ark, and leave an eighteen-inch opening just under the roof.'
(Evangelical Heritage Version)

'Make a roof for the boat and leave a space of 18 inches between the roof and the sides.'
(Good News Translation)

'Make an opening around the top of the boat.' (New Century Bible, International Children's Bible)

'Make an opening one cubit below the top of the ark all around' (Modern English Version)

'Construct a skylight all the way around the ship, eighteen inches below the roof' (The Living Bible)

'Make an opening around the top of the boat' (New Century Bible)

'Leave an 18-inch opening below the roof all the way around the boat.' (New Living Translation)

'Put a roof on the ark and leave a gap of 18 inches below the roofline for air to circulate.'
(The Voice Bible)

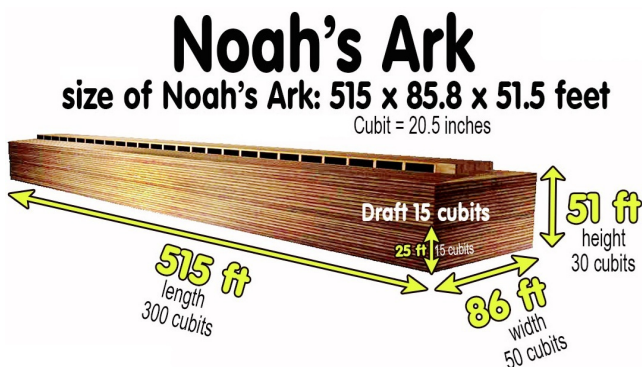
Most of the commentators agree upon this form of '*clerestory principle*' construction, allowing light and clean air to enter from above. [Cassuto, 2:65; Mathews, 1:365; Wenham, 1:173; Kidner, 87f; Keil, 1:142f; Currid, 1:190; Skinner, 1:161f; Lange, 1:299]



House with clerestory style roof



House with clerestory windows



One artist's rendering of the Ark



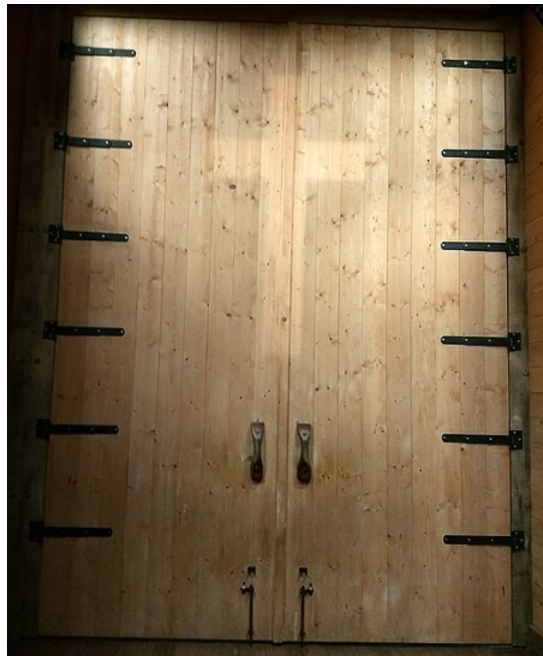
The Ark Encounter, Northern Kentucky USA

As a reminder, no one knows for certain how the Ark was constructed. While there is a general consensus and what has been stated falls within the Scriptural parameters, there are also other possibilities:

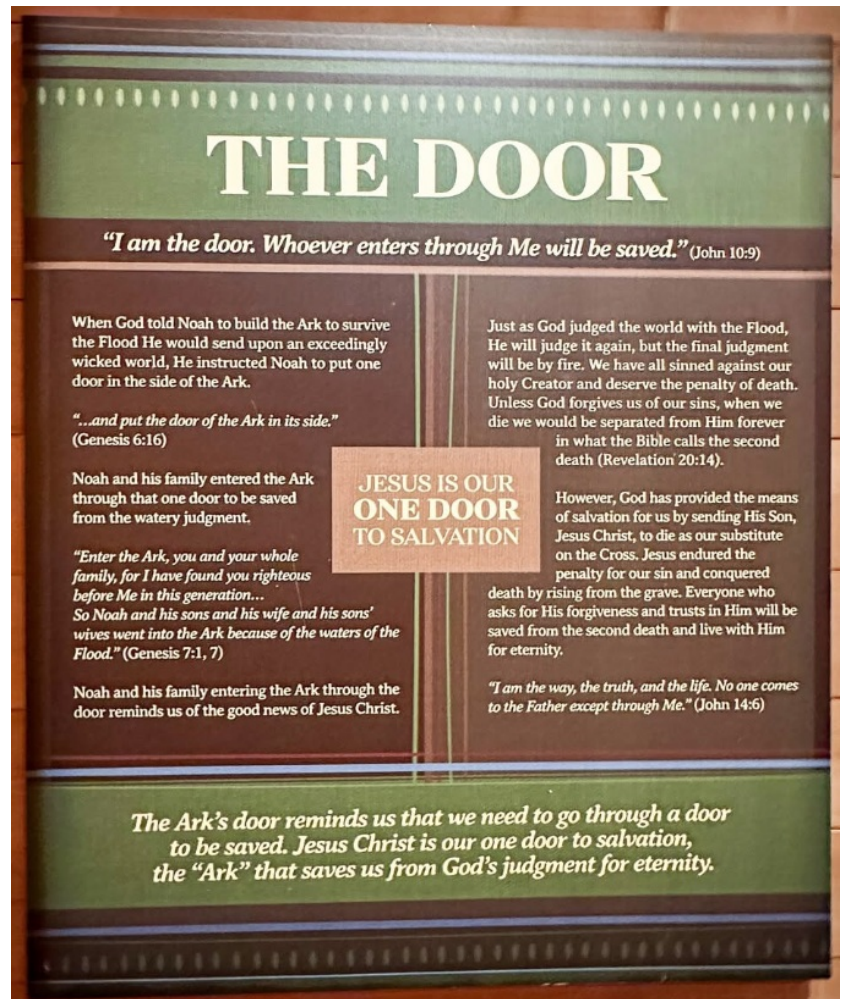
- “The Ark’s roof sloped upward to a cubit, so that the rain would run off.” [Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, or The Five Books of Moses in book form (Mehorah Publications LTD, Brooklyn NY) 2011, page 31]
- The roof constructed so that it overhangs the walls of the ark by a cubit, possibly being made of skins like the cover of the tabernacle. [Mathews, 1:365; Wenham, 1:173f]

And the door of the ark you shall put in its side. — “In this huge ark there shall be a door, which shall permit entry and exit. This door was not to be a big one in proportion to the size of the ark, but a side entrance, small and unimposing, in order that it should be easily closed and firmly secured. Also in the Mesopotamian tradition the door of the boat is mentioned.” [Cassuto, 2:65] “The ‘door’ is of obvious importance, literally and in symbol (cf. 7:16): our Lord made much of the figure in the metaphor of the sheepfold (Jn 10:1-9).” [Kidner, 89]

With a lower, second, and third deck you shall make it. — The fourth directive in the verse: the ark was divided into three stories; literally, ‘*underneaths, seconds, thirds,*’ but that decks are meant is understood by everyone. “The rabbis understood this tiered system as follows: ‘... the top rooms for the human beings, the middle ones as cabins for the cattle, and the bottom was for the refuse.’ [Rashi Commentary, p. 28]” [Currid, 1:190] Whereas the biblical ark had three decks, the Babylonian myths had seven.



The door in the Ark; Ark Encounter, Northern KY USA



Evangelistic plaque for the door in the Ark; Ark Encounter, Northern KY USA