

---

*When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood*, by J. David Pleins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 242. Hardcover. \$29.95. ISBN 0195156080.

This book leaves the reviewer with several striking impressions: the huge amount of literature about Noah's flood the author must have read, and the winning and at times amusing style in which the book is written. J. David Pleins is Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University. He teaches courses in biblical studies and comparative ancient Near Eastern literature and mythology. In his book he collects a fascinating amount of suggested readings of the Genesis story from the rabbinic era up to modern times, and he pursues the issue of how to ask the right questions about the biblical text.

In the preface Pleins states: "This book asks: What is the truth of Noah's flood story, and how is that truth to be found? This question provides us with

an intriguing opportunity to explore new links between archaeology and myth, literary methods and the Bible, and science and belief" (ix). Pleins assumes that there must be some truth in the story, since people of all times never stopped to ask for the meaning of this story and to approach it in an unbelievable variety of ways. Pleins brings all these readings together and asks: "Why do people care? . . . Why spend all that money mucking about in the Black Sea or digging up the mounds of the Middle East? Why bother about the ebb and flow of such a distant past?" (x). Behind that stands the deeper question: "Why do people look for tangible evidence of God's presence in our world?"

The first chapter sums up several rather strange-looking attempts to find archaeological evidence for the story of Noah's ark: scientific explorations of the flooding of the Black Sea, using sophisticated sonar readings and deep-sea core drilling, and the like. There have also been several expeditions seeking to find the ark—labeled by Pleins as "mountain mania."

This opens the way for asking how one should read the Bible adequately. The second chapter displays competing ways to read Genesis. Pleins sketches four "camps": the "exact literalists," who insist on "the Bible tells me so"; the "loose literalists," who see science as a kind of supplement to the Old Testament; the "myth as nonsense" school, who declare that science no longer provides a way to read the Bible; and another mythic approach that sees the myths as powerful tales that provide deep insights into the human soul and its experiences. In the following chapters the four camps are illustrated by a variety of examples.

The "literalist's lens" is investigated in chapter 3. Pleins juxtaposes G. Wenham's view of a seamless tale by one sophisticated author with the more usual scholarly hypothesis of several sources (beginning with J. Astruc). Pleins also adds examples from early rabbinic readings (Targum, Talmud) and describes the Bible-code approach. He concludes that no single approach exhausts the meaning of the text and admonishes that a fundamentalist "literalism" misses much that can be said about the text.

Chapter 4 illustrates further the fundamentalist literalism and creation "science," that is, the variety of efforts to read the biblical text as a source book for scientific knowledge—or to explain the narrated phenomena in a scientific way. Here Pleins also reports the past and ongoing controversy between evolutionists and creationists in the American education system.

In the fifth chapter Pleins asks for more details from the story: How do traditional and early scientific visions of the flood ask and explain questions such as "Where did Noah put the garbage?" There are a number of pseudo-scientific and scientific answers to such questions, but most of the approaches end up shearing away elements that are essential to the tales themselves (see 99).

From chapter 6 onward Pleins adopts the mythic view. He first demonstrates positions that see myth as nonsense and passes then on to the more

helpful insight that mythology plays a vital role for the sharing of human life and culture. To illustrate that, Pleins discusses several of the ancient Mesopotamian flood tales. Chapter 7 confronts these myths with the biblical story itself and demonstrates how the biblical accounts (the Priestly Code P and the Yahwist J) differ in various ways from their ancient Near Eastern background.

Chapters 8 and 9 cover some special items of the biblical text and its reception. The story about the drunken Noah and the curse on Ham's son Canaan (Gen 9:20–27) receive special attention in chapter 8. Pleins presents a strange reading that intends to save Noah from being a drunkard. This reading sees the alcohol of the story as a means for Noah's procreativity, which Ham steals from the patriarch. Another reading develops a racist position: African Americans were seen as descendants of Ham, and the biblical text was read as a permission for their enslavement. Pleins reveals his own perspective on such readings in the heading of the chapter: "When Myths Go Wrong." Chapter 9 shows attempts to make the women in the stories visible: Pleins sums up the feminists' critique of biblical androcentrism. As an example, Pleins presents the book *Mr. and Mrs. Job* by Ellen van Wolde in which she creates voices for two of the more obscure female characters of the Hebrew Bible: Job's wife and Noah's wife write an imaginary letter to modern readers of van Wolde's book.

Pleins comes back to hermeneutical questions in chapter 10, where he asks boldly: "Can we really dig up God?" Starting with the desperate search for faith's elusive facts in books such as Werner Keller's *The Bible as History*, Pleins describes the role of archaeology between "necessary dimension" and "fifth wheel." He then takes a wider scope on the discussion about the relationship of science and religion, fact and faith. In his conclusion, Pleins returns to his initial question about the truth in Noah's flood story. Reviewing the wide variety of traditions of readings, Pleins opts not to limit himself to only one reading or one school of thought. In its openness, the flood story offers many truths, and there are many ways of unlocking them.

Pleins summarizes briefly the positive contributions of the four "camps" identified in chapter 2. It is fascinating how Pleins sees positive aspects in each of the approaches, but he also points rightly to the danger of doing *bad* archaeology and *bad* theology, such as using the Bible as if it were some sort of a Michelin guide to the undersoils of the Middle East or reading the biblical stories in a racist way. Bad biblical theology and archaeology short-circuit the openness required by the renewed dialogue between religion and science. In the appendix, Pleins breaks down the two versions of the biblical flood story into their component parts (called J and P; the author uses his own translation). He thus takes the theory of sources for the origin of the Pentateuch for granted—here one could miss an effort to *read* the Bible's flood story as a unity and to try to understand it as it currently stands (from a synchronic perspective). The reviewer is not sure whether such a splitting of

hypothetical sources is helpful for the reader of the book, since most of the readings that Pleins presents do not rely on a diachronic separation of sources in the story. The other parts of the appendix cover the endnotes, the bibliography, and—most helpfully—the index of names and subjects. The artwork on the dust jacket shows a painting by Hans Baldung Grien (1484–1545) entitled “Noah and the Flood” from the year 1516. The original is displayed in the Neue Residenz, Bamberg, Germany.

In sum, Pleins’s book is a plea for many different stories to tell and a multitude of possible readings of the stories and the past. Pleins has achieved his aim formulated in the preface (xi): this book is enjoyable and thought-provoking. One can recommend it to biblical scholars, archaeologists, theologians, and scientists—all who are interested in a lively discussion about human culture and religion.

Thomas Hieke  
University of Regensburg  
Regensburg, Germany D-91275