

Religious Literature, The realistic, and the Fantastic: Mythological Creatures in Midrashic Interpretations of the Story of the Flood and Noah's Ark

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Abstract

The current study discusses several ancient Jewish traditions that speak of mythological-fantastic creatures in Noah's ark. The biblical text does not list the types of organisms that entered the ark, rather makes do with noting the groups of animals in general. The Midrashic literature on the story of the ark lists various species of fantastic humans and animals – Og king of Bashan, the giant *re'em* or the eternally living phoenix. It may be assumed that these creatures were included for several reasons:

A. The ancients believed that these were realistic creatures and therefore assumed that they too had entered the ark. B. The mythological animals aroused the imagination of the ancients and they were eager to hear stories about them.

Keywords: Flood, Noah's Ark, Midrash, Mythological Creatures, Og, Re'em, Phoenix.

Literatura religiosa, realista e fantástica: Criaturas mitológicas nas interpretações midrashicas da história do dilúvio e da arca de Noé

Resumo

O artigo discute tradições judaicas antigas a respeito de criaturas mitológicas-fantásticas na arca de Noé. O texto bíblico não elenca as espécies vivas que adentraram na arca, mas faz questão de observar os grupos de animais em geral. A literatura midrashica lista várias espécies de seres humanos e animais fantásticos na história da arca – por exemplo, Og, rei de Basã, o gigante *re'em* ou, ainda, a fênix eterna. Pode-se supor que tais criaturas foram incluídas por vários motivos, dentre eles: (1) os antigos acreditavam que eram criaturas realistas e, portanto, assumiram que elas próprias também haviam entrado na arca e (2) os animais mitológicos despertaram a imaginação dos antigos sedentos para ouvir histórias sobre tais animais.

Palavras-chave: Inundação, Arca de Noé, Midrash, Criaturas mitológicas, Og, Re'em, Fênix.

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The story of the flood (Genesis 6:5–9:17) describes God’s decision to destroy the world in response to the bad deeds of His creatures. God removed His creatures from the face of the earth by flooding the world with water, and aside from a select group of people and animals who were saved by means of the ark that Noah built, nothing remained. After the initial creation of the world, man sinned and was exiled from the Garden of Eden, followed by the deterioration and overall decline of humanity, and finally the flood. The story of the flood and of the ark is therefore a second chapter (“The Second Genesis”) in the history of the universe. The dwellers of the ark, humans, fowls, beasts, and insects (Genesis 7:2), were intended as a prospective nucleus from which a new, good, and proper world would be formed (Genesis 7:14-22).

In the ancient world the existence of creatures with unusual and exceptional qualities – human creatures, hybrid creatures, flying creatures, and animals – was a commonly held belief (SOUTH, 1988; ROSE, 2001). Aside from the raven and the dove, the text does not mention the animals who entered the ark by name. As part of the expansion and interpretation of the story of the flood, Midrashic authors note various species of animals that lived in their times, which they assumed had been in the ark, for instance lions, elephants, ostriches, and bears (See for example, THEODOR and ALBECK, 1903, 31:21, p. 87; BUBER, 1894, 7:16, p. 18).

The goals of the study

The current article discusses several ancient Midrashic traditions that speak of mythological-fantastic creatures in Noah’s ark – both animals and humans. The article has at its base two main purposes:

1. To portray the legendary creatures that appear in the Midrashic literature, with reference to the prevalent set of beliefs in the classical and Jewish world.
2. To discuss the circumstances underlying the mention of these creatures as being in Noah’s ark and the literary and ideological aims of the Midrashim that speak of them.

In fact, a fairly wide body of literature has been written about Aggadic homilies (Mmidreshei Aggadah) – Their contents, the style and theological themes in which they deal (See for example GINZBERG, 1942; URBACH, 1969; HEINEMANN, 1970; HEINEMANN, 1974; FRAENKEL, 1981; SHINAN, 1987; MACK, 1989). Various studies were dedicated to the story of

the flood and Noah's Ark in Jewish tradition (see for example LEWIS, 1968, 121-155; LEWIS, 1984; AMIHAY, 2010; SHARON, 2010), however, only few studies deal with the flood according to the midrash literature (GINZBERG, 1942, vol. 1, p. 145-169; GINZBERG, 1988; BAUMGARTEN 1975). Moreover, the issue of mythological creatures was discussed concerning many Jewish subjects, such as halakha (SHEMESH 2006), but not in the context of the story of Noah's Ark and the flood.

Fantastic creatures in rabbinical literature - Review

Influenced by the non-Jewish surroundings and culture, Jews described in their religious writings various mythological animals, for instance the salamander, dragons, centaurs, and others.¹ Large creatures are mentioned in Jewish sources by Greek-Roman (*kintorin*), Hebrew (*זיז*), or Aramaic names (*bar yochni* and *krum*), and sometimes with no name at all.² In the belief that these are realistic creatures, the sages included them not only in Aggadic and Midrashic works, but rather also in the halakhic discourse, clarifying their status with regard to various halakhic areas. For example, the sages discussed the question of impurity and purity with regard to “human-ape” (*adne sade/avne sade*), sirens, and mice that are half-flesh and half-earth (SHEMESH, 2006, p. 509–519).

The flood and Noah's ark of salvation are one of the biblical stories where Talmudic and Midrashic sages combined fantastic creatures that they perceived as real. In the following lines we shall portray these animals and the circumstances of their inclusion in the story of the ark, as reflected in the narrative of Midrashic literature.

¹ On dragons in the Jewish literature see ALBECK, 1952, Avoda Zara 3:3; BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Gittin 56b-57a. On centaurs (*kintorin*) see THEODOR and ALBECK, 1903, 23:6, p. 227. On mythological creatures in Jewish Sages literature see at length LIEBERMAN, 1963, p. 286-287; BAR-ILAN, 1994, p. 104-113; SLIFKIN, 2007; NISSAN, 2013-2014, p. 3–63; NISSAN, 2015-2016, p. 257-294.

² *Bar yochni* is described in the Jewish ancient literature as a giant bird see BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Bechorot 57b; Yoma 80a; Sukka 5b. On the *זיז*, a huge fowl see THEODOR and ALBECK, 1903, 19:4, p. 173; MARGALIOTH, 1993, 22:10, p. 523, and at length NISSAN, 1999, p. 393–400; KAPLAN, 2013, p. 33-50. On huge fishes and giant sea animals see BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Baba Batra 73b-74b. As L. Jacobs has shown in the Babylonian Talmud there is extensive use of mythological elements which were drawn from the non-Jew environment. See JACOBS, 1977, p. 1–11.

Og king of Bashan – the giant from the generation of the flood

In the section that precedes the description of the flood, the biblical text (Genesis 6: 1-7) speaks of the destruction and evil that were introduced into the world following the marriage of sons of God with the daughters of humans and the birth of the ‘heroes’ (*giborim*) or ‘giants’ (*nefilim*). These figures receive no further description in the verses, but the Midrashic literature emphasizes their great and unusual strength and their attempt to thwart and disrupt the divine plan of the flood.

The heroes not only try to damage the ark and its residents (BUBER, 1894, 7:16, p. 18), but also “would place their foot on the chasm and block it and [when the hero] would attempt to enter the ark his feet would be burned [in the text: *mitarkelof*]” (RE’EM, 1878, 31:12, p. 129). Midrash Genesis Rabbah illustrates the unusual strength of the heroes-giants by relating that they were capable of stepping on the chasm from which the water emanated and blocking it, and according to another tradition mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, the heroes boasted that they have “lanterns [=balls] of iron with which we plate the earth”. According to the verses (Genesis 7:11), the flood was a result of strong rains coming from the heavens as well as the eruption of springs from the ground, and stepping on them was intended to block them.

The belligerence of the heroes does not assist them to sabotage the plans for the flood. When they attempted to enter the ark their feet were burned and they were unable to do so. The exegetist did not state the cause of the burns, and an explanation of this is offered by Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer the water that emanated from the chasm was hot: “What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He heated the waters of the deep, and they arose and burnt their flesh, and peeled off their skin from them” (HOROWITZ, 1972, p. 78).

A homiletic tradition that relates that the flood water was boiling hot is brought in the Babylonian Talmud, and it enhances the idea of compensation following the rule of measure for measure (Telionic Punishment) – the sin of wasting semen, which involves the ejaculation of hot fluid in the context of forbidden sexual relations: “R. Hisda said: The people in the generation of the Flood sinned with hot passion, and with hot water they were punished” (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Zevachim 113b). R. Yohanan relates that three of the hot springs involved in the deaths of the generation of the flood are still in existence: “R. Johanan said: Three of those [hot fountains] were

left, the gulf of Gaddor, the hot-springs of Tiberias, and the great well of Biram” (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Sanhedrin 108a). R. Yohanan, an amora who lived in the Land of Israel and appears to have been familiar with the hot springs in the region of the Dead Sea Valley and the Jordan Valley, uses these well known springs to demonstrate the sin committed by the generation of the flood. Hence, despite their great strength their scheme did not succeed because they did not survive the hot water that erupted from the earth.

One of the giants who received a great deal of attention in the story of the ark is Og king of Bashan, who according to the Midrashic authors survived the flood. Og’s incredible height, listed as he was among the *refa'im*, i.e., giants, was demonstrated in the scriptures by means of his bed: “For only Og king of Bashan remained of the remnant of giants; behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron; is it not in Rabbath of the children of Ammon? nine cubits was the length thereof, and four cubits the breadth of it, after the cubit of a man” (KJV). Og’s unusual size was described with much exaggeration in the Mishna and Talmud era. Rabbinical traditions relate that his ankle was thirty cubits high and his thigh bone over three parasangs long, while according to another version his leg was 18 cubits long. He ate enormous quantities of food and was even capable of uprooting a mountain of three parasangs (on Og see BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Berachot 54b; Nidda 24b; BUBER, 1891, 136:12, p. 522; KOSMAN, 2002, p. 157-190).

According to the translation ascribed to Jonathan ben Uziel (GINZBURGER, 1903, Genesis 6:4, p. 11), and Midrash Genesis Rabbati (ALBECK, 1940, Parashat Bereshit 6:2), compiled in the time of the *Rishonim* (medieval Rabbis) and based on ancient midrashim, Apocrypha, and particularly the words of R. Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne, Og was a descendant of the giants (*nefilim*, from the phrase: fell [*naflu*] from the heavens”) Shamhazai and Aza’el, two angels who formed marriage ties with daughters of humans. Midrash Genesis Rabbati relates that these two fathered giants who behaved maliciously and engaged in thievery, robbery, and murder, sins that resulted in the flood. The sons of Shamhazai and Azael were the fathers of Sihon and Og, two giants who survived the flood (Albeck, 1940, Parashat Bereshit 6:2).

Og’s survival of the flood was noted in several Talmudic sources, albeit fairly laconically (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Nidda 61b; Zevachim 113b). One Midrash that relates how Og survived the flood in a fair amount of detail is Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer:

And all living things which were upon the face of the earth decayed, as it is said, “And every living thing was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground” (Gen. 7:23), except Noah and those who were with him in the ark, as it is said, “And Noah only was left, and they that were with him in the ark” (*ibid.*), except Og, king of Bashan, who sat down on a piece of wood under the gutter of the ark. He swore to Noah and to his sons that he would be their servant for ever. What did Noah do? He bored an aperture in the ark, and he put (through it) his food daily for him, and he also was left, as it is said, “For only Og, king of Bashan, remained of the remnant of the giants” (Deut. 3:11) (HOROWITZ, 1972, p. 78).

Unlike the sinful people of his generation who were killed in the flood, Og survived the flood, aided by Noah. According to the midrash, he perched outside the ark on one rung of the ladders that served the ark’s inhabitants to enter and leave. In contrast to the midrashim that speak of heroes who tried to break into the ark in order to survive but were not granted shelter, the current midrash indicates a different attitude to Og.

It is not clear why Noah helped Og survive by providing him with food on a daily basis, as according to God’s commands only Noah and his family were to have been saved. Og indeed swears that he will be Noah’s slave, but this does not seem to provide any justification for his salvation. The midrash does not state why Noah did not let Og into the ark, but it seems that this was because of Og’s unusual size. For this reason, Noah made a hole in the side of the ark, through which he provided Og with food.

Many years later, when the Israelites were about to enter the Land of Israel, Og king of Bashan and Sihon king of the Emory declared war on the Israelites. The lesson to be learned, according to the narrative of the midrash, is that a wicked creature who was treated with compassion and consideration and was not destroyed when he should have been, eventually becomes an obstacle to the divine plan. But then the Israelites battle against them both and are victorious (Numbers 21:21-35).

The *re'em*

According to the biblical narrator, all the animals that were to be preserved and saved entered the ark, and once they had all gathered the flood commenced (Genesis 7: 13-16). Although the scriptures stress that the mission was completed in full, the Talmud and the Midrash raise the question of whether and how the *re'em* entered the ark. The following tradition was brought in the Babylonian Talmud:

where did the re'em stay? Said R. Jannai: They took the young [of the re'em] into the Ark. But surely Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said: I saw a sea re'em, one day old, which was as big as Mount Tabor. And how big is Mount Tabor? Forty parasangs. Its neck, stretched out, was three parasangs; the place where its head rested was a parasang and a half. It cast a ball of excrements and blocked the Jordan! Said R. Johanan: They took its head [only] into the Ark. But a master said: The place where its head rested was three parasangs? Rather, they took the tip of its nose into the Ark [...] Resh Lakish Said: They tied its horns to the Ark (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Zevachim 113b).

R. Jannai, the Israeli amora in the first generation, argued that the young cubs of the re'em were taken into the Ark. The redactor of the Talmud was skeptical of this claim, as according to the farfetched description of Rabba Bar Bar Hana, the amora known for his fantastic voyages, the calves of the *re'em* too were very big (On Rabbah b. Bar Hanah and his tales see EISENSTEIN, 1937; BEN AMOS, 1976, p. 25–43; JACOBS, 1991, p. 80; GERSHENSON, 1994, p. 23–36; KIPPERWASSER, 2007-2008, p. 215-242).

The Talmud solves the problem through a suggestion made by R. Yohanan, the opponent of Resh Lakish, whereby only the head of the *re'em* was in the ark, and later on the redactor further contends that only the tip of its nose was in the ark. Resh Lakish, one of the greatest Land of Israel amoraim in the second generation, went on to contend that the *re'em* was not in the ark at all but rather was tied to the ark by its horns and pulled in its wake.

A similar tradition is brought in the midrash in the name of other sages and in a shorter and more matter-of-fact version:

R. Yehuda says that the *re'em* did not come into the ark, but its calves did, R. Nehemiah says neither it nor its calves, rather Noah tied it to the ark and it formed furrows as from Tiberias to Susita" (THEODOR-ALBECK, 1903, Parashat Noah 31:19).

The rabbinical literature contains many disputes between R. Yehuda and R. Nehemiah, and in this context, it seems that these were the two amoraim and not the tana'im of the same names (MARGALIOTH, 2000, p. 268). Similar to R. Yanai in the Talmud, R. Yehuda too thinks that the adult *re'em* did not enter the ark rather only the younger individuals. R. Nehemiah, a Land of Israel amora of the Aggadic authors from the fourth generation, presents an identical view to that of Resh Lakish, whereby the *re'em* did not enter the ark at all rather it was tied outside, although not necessarily by its

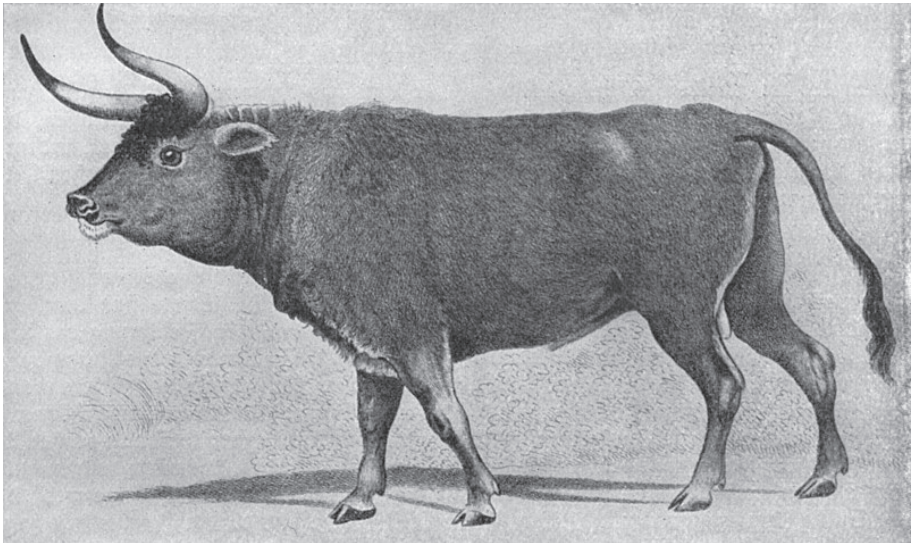
horns. His reference to the furrows that the *re'em* made in the ground stress its height exaggeratedly. In contrast to the ark that floated on the water, the feet of the *re'em* came into contact with the ground and apparently, because it was dragged by the ark, the tips of its feet formed furrows.

In fact, both the Talmud and the Midrash assume as a point of departure that this was a very large animal, and in the next few lines I shall discuss in short the literary and folkloristic background on the fantastic figure of the *re'em* as reflected in Talmudic sources. In the Bible, the *re'em* is mentioned many times. It is described as a strong animal that roams wild and cannot be domesticated, and also as having large strong horns capable of butting and inflicting harm (Numbers 23:22, 24:8; Deuteronomy 33:17; Psalms 22:22, 29:5-6, 92:11; Job 39:9-12).

Some researchers are of the opinion that the term *re'em* in the scriptures refers to two different types of mammals – one is the aurochs or urus (*bos primigenius*), and the other is a species of antelope (*Oryx* sp.). However, the aurochs is a better match for the Talmudic and Midrashic sources we have before us.

Figure: *Bos primigenius*

Charles Hamilton Smith's copy of a painting possibly dating to the 16th century



Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ur-painting.jpg>

According to archeo-zoological finds, the aurochs existed in the southern Levant until the late Iron Age (VON DEN DRIESCH and BOESSNECK, 1995, p. 68). The aurochs was common in the forests of central Europe in the time of Julius Caesar (1st century). In a description of the Hercynian Forest, he described the aurochs as a large strong animal:

A third specie consists of the ure-oxen [=aurochs, *Bos primigenius*] socalled. In size these are somewhat smaller than elephants; in appearance, colour, and shape they are as bulls. Great is their strength and great their speed, and they spare neither man nor beast once sighted. These the Germans slay zealously, by taking them in pits [...] those who have slain most of them bring the horns with them to a public place for a testimony and win great renown. But even if they are caught very young, the animals cannot be tamed or accustomed to human beings. In bulk, shape, and appearance their horns are very different from the horns of our own oxen (CAESAR, 1917, *The Gallic War*, VI, 28).

In the era of the Mishna and Talmud some researchers claimed that the *re'em* was no longer extant in the Land of Israel and its environs; from a realistic beast it was transformed into a fabulous beast of giant dimensions (FELIX, 1992, p. 101; DAYAN, 2017, p. 220-231). A Talmudic Aggadah relates that in the days of R. Hiya bar Abba a calf of a *re'em*, that was very big, ascended to the Land of Israel and left no tree. Whole people fasted and Rabbi Hiya prayed and then its mother bellowed from the desert and it descended from the land (RE'EM, 1878, 31:13, p. 130). This midrash explains the opinion of those who thought that the giant calves too were unable to enter the ark and thus the only choice was to tie them outside the ark.

Following the verse in Psalms 22:22 “save me from the horns of the wild oxen” (KJV) Sages relate in exaggerated way on David’s most serious adventure with the reem. David encountered the mammoth beast asleep, and taking it for a mountain, he began to ascend it. Suddenly the reem awoke, and David found himself high up in the air on its horns. He vowed, if he were rescued, to build a temple to God one hundred ells in height, as high as the horns of the reem. Thereupon God sent a lion. The king of beasts inspired even the reem with awe. The reem prostrated himself, and David could easily descend from his perch. At that moment a deer appeared. The

lion pursued after him, and David was saved from the lion as well as the reem (See BUBER, 1891, p. 195; GINZBERG, 1942, p. 83).

In her book on the Jewish world of Aggadah, Gertrude Landa includes an illustration of the Illustrator Sol Aronson that describes Og king of Bashan (see above) riding a unicorn portrayed as a horse, tied to Noah's ark by its horn.



Source: Gertrude Landa, *Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends*, New York: Bloch Publishing 1919 (rep. London: Abela Publishing, 2009), p. 20

The drawing combines the two traditions, from the Talmud and the Midrash, that relate to Og and the *re'em* that were unable to enter Noah's ark due to their unusual size. According to the midrash mentioned above, Og was saved from the flood by perching on one rung of the ark's ladder, but the illustrator chose to portray Og astride the giant *re'em*.

The illustrator embraced the Talmudic tradition's identification of the *re'em* with the unicorn, as customary in non-Jewish translations (see below), but as stated, according to Jewish sources it seems more reasonable that it was an aurochs. The illustration chose the version brought by Resh Lakish, whereby the *re'em* did not enter the ark at all and was tied by its horns (or for the unicorn – by its one horn) to the ark.

The phoenix (*orshina*)

The phoenix (in Hebrew *off ha'bol*, lit. sand bird) is a mythological fowl that appears in various cultures and religions, for instance in ancient Egyptian mythology, Greek mythology, and in the Christian faith as a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus (BLAKE, 1964). The phoenix is also mentioned in ancient Jewish sources within various genres – in the Talmud, the Midrash, and the Apocrypha (VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 465-468). It is described as a long-living bird associated with the sun, and there are various versions with regard to its life span (see below) (VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 67-70).

In a cyclic process, the phoenix dies by fire and is resurrected from the ashes. It is mentioned quite a lot in the writings of Greek and Roman authors, and these undoubtedly contributed to the recording and dispersal of the myth (See for example HERODOTUS, 1926, *Historia* II 73; LUCAN, 1928, VI, 680, 1-4; PLINY, 1961, *Natural History* X, 4, XII, 85; LACTANTIUS, 1934, 79-88; CLAUDIAN, 1990, *Phoenix*, 30-35, 72-100; EPIPHANIUS, 2014, *Ancoratus* 84, 3; LUCIAN, 1961, *De morte Peregrini*, 27.). The tradition concerning the cyclic life and regeneration of the phoenix after it is burned emerged in the Middle Ages and this element is evident, for example, in the writings of Isidore of Seville, who lived and operated at the turn of the sixth and seventh century (ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, 2006, *Etymologies*, XII, 7, 22). As stated by Van der Broek, until the 17th century at least, some European scholars continued to claim that the phoenix is a real bird, although some doubted this (VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 4).

The biblical text does not refer to the occurrences and daily routine within the ark during the flood. In rabbinical times the exegetists noted the lack of information concerning this time span and they indicated various events involving Noah and the animals. The Babylonian Talmud brings an imaginary dialogue between Eliezer, Abraham's servant, and Shem, Noah's son, on happenings within the ark. Shem tells Eliezer about an incident that occurred between Noah, his father, and a bird called *orshina*:

As for the 'orshina', my father discovered it lying 'in the hold of the ark. "Dost thou require no food?" he asked it. "I saw that thou wast busy," it replied, "so I said to myself, I will give thee no trouble." "May it be (God's) will that thou shouldst not perish," he exclaimed; as it is written, "Then I said, I shall die in the nest, but I shall multiply my days as the phoenix" [Job 29:18] (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882, Sanhedrin 108b).

According to the story related, the *orshina* did not ask for food and even after Noah noticed this it does not say that Noah gave it any food. The issue of the phoenix's food occupied Greek and Roman sages. Manilius claimed that no one has ever seen the phoenix eat (PLINY, 1961, Natural History X, 4). As Van der Broek notes, this declaration may mean that it never eats, a fact that is associated with our midrash which states that this bird is capable of fasting for a long time, or as Claudian argued that its food is not physical food (CLAUDIEN, 1990, Phoenix, 13-16; VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 335-336). According to other opinions, the phoenix eats aromatic plants, a fact that emphasizes its unusual status.

Etiologically, the current midrash may be a later story, one that attempts to explain the phenomenon of the phoenix's longevity retrospectively. The exegetist proposes a theological principle and an educational interpretation of the phoenix's eternal life – the doctrine of reward and punishment. Noah blesses the bird with longevity as a reward for not asking for food while in the ark. The phoenix saw that Noah was busy feeding the rest of the animals and wanted to spare him further work. The exegetist does not make do with the story itself, rather also brings a reference from a verse in the book of Job teaching that *hol* is rewarded with longevity. Nevertheless, the verse does not explain why, and this detail is complemented by the narrative tradition in the midrash. Rashi, in his commentaries on the Talmud and Bible, states that the *orshina*, or "*hol*", is the phoenix that is repeatedly burned and resurrected (BABYLONIAN TALMUD, 1882,

Sanhedrin 108b; Job 29:18, and compare YALKUT SHIMONI, 1975, Job, *Remez* 917).

While according to the Talmud the phoenix was rewarded with longevity following Noah's blessing, another midrash claims that this reward derived from its exemplary behavior in a previous incident. According to the biblical story, Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge and fed her husband as well (Genesis 3:6). The midrash expands the circle of sinners who took part in the eating and claims that Eve also fed all the animals, indicating that in practice all living creatures sinned. However the phoenix was an exception, as it avoided eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. According to the scriptures, eating from the Tree of Knowledge resulted in the death of those who ate (Genesis 2:17), and since the phoenix did not eat, it enjoys eternal life:

[Eve] fed the animals and the beasts and the fowls, and all did as she said aside from one bird named *chol* as it was said: I shall multiply my days as the *chol* [in KJV: "as the sand"]. [...], in the study hall of R. Jannai they said: it lives one thousand years and after one thousand years fire comes out of its nest and burns it, and an egg-like quantity remains, and it regrows its body parts and lives, R. Yuden son of R. Shimon says: it lives one thousand years and after one thousand years its body is consumed and its wings become bedraggled and an egg-like quantity remains, and it regrows its body parts" (RE'EM, 1878, 19:5, p. 85) .

The current midrash too bases the homiletic interpretation whereby the phoenix was rewarded with longevity on the verse from Job, although as stated it attributes this to not eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The exegesis's note various traditions regarding the longevity of the phoenix. In the study hall of R. Jannai, a Land of Israel amora from the first generation, it was related that the phoenix lives one thousand years and at the end of this time its nest is consumed by fire and it is burned. Only a small quantity of it remains and it slowly develops, grows flesh, and is resurrected. According to the tradition available to R. Yuden, also a Land of Israel amora from the first generation, the bird is not burned rather it rots and disintegrates and then its body parts regrow anew.

In the non-Jewish world there were two main versions regarding the life and death of the phoenix and these too indicate that its life ended through fire or death. According to the more common tradition, at the end of its

life term the phoenix is consumed by fire while in its nest. As a result of the sun's heat the nest, made of aromatic plants gathered by the phoenix, is consumed by fire and a new phoenix is born from the ashes. According to the less common tradition, which parallels that of R. Yuden, the phoenix is not burned. It dies in its nest, which as stated was made of aromatic plants. After its body rots, a new phoenix begins to develop from the rotted remnants (VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 146).

Classical sources have different versions as to the phoenix's life span. Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC), Ovid (43 BC – 17/18 CE), Tacitus (c. 56 CE– c. 120 CE) and others claimed that the phoenix lives for 500 years (HERODOTUS, 1926, *Historia* II 73; OVID, 1986, *Metamorphoses*, XV, 395; TACITUS, 1937, *Annals* VI, 28). Other versions have one thousand years (PLINY, 1961, XXIX, 29; MARTIAL, 1993, *Epigrams* V, 7, 2; LACTANTIUS, 1934, *De ave phoenice* 59; CLAUDIAN, 1990, *Phoenix* 27), and there is even a version originating from the Egyptian Sothic cycle whereby its life lasts 1461 years (VAN DER BROEK, 1972, p. 70). The two Jewish exegetists cited above are of the opinion that the phoenix lived for one thousand years. It may be assumed that this view originated from and was influenced by the Greco-Roman world, but it is not impossible that it was embraced for internal-Jewish ideological reasons. A life span of one thousand years is mentioned in one of the midrashim as the period of time that Adam was intended to have lived, but he gave up seventy years of his life for King David and thus lived only 930 years (YALKUT SHIMONI, 1975, *Prashat Bereshit*, *remez* 41).

The pre-sin biblical story does not relate to Adam's life span and does not limit it. Moreover, the text states explicitly that only when eating from the fruit of the tree will Adam die. The fact that the midrash refers to one thousand years indicates that this period symbolizes a lengthy span and longevity, and it may be a typological number (compare to Psalms 90:4). Hence, it may be assumed that the phoenix, which did not sin, achieves a life of one thousand years, i.e., a full and lengthy life, and then it burns or is consumed and once again in a cyclic manner lives for another lengthy period.

Discussion and conclusions

The story of a flood that covered extensive areas appears not only in the Bible but rather is also evident in Mesopotamian traditions, such as in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (GEORGE, 1999, p. 88-115). The story of the flood

attracted the criticism and contempt of pagan Hellenistic authors. These doubted the story's veracity and wondered how such a significant event could have left no impression on the Greeks and their cosmogony (SHAVIT, 1988-1989, p. 9-10). Indeed, this criticism motivated the first Christians, such as Procopius of Gaza (c. A.D. 465–c. 538), to seek “rationalist” explanations proving that the biblical tradition is indeed true (YOUNG, 1995, p. 26; MONTGOMERY, 2013, p. 9–19).

The ancient Jewish interpretations, the Talmud and the Midrashim, which adhered to the biblical tradition, unquestioningly accepted the story as true. Instead of utilizing ancient “science” to prove that the occurrences could have indeed come to pass, Jewish exegesis engaged in solving issues and questions, sometimes fairly technical, that arise from the text. Among the questions discussed were: How did Noah distinguish between pure and impure animals before the Torah of Moses was written? Did the animals in the ark include the phoenix? How did Noah feed all the animals without exhausting himself? And how did particularly large animals enter the ark?

The questions raised indicate that the exegetists were aware that various parts of the story of Noah and the ark required interpretation, expansion, and explanation. Indeed, the biblical text lacks various details regarding planning for the mission (obtaining types of food), the gathering of the animals and entering the ark, and events and occurrences while in the ark. The biblical text does not list the types of organisms that entered the ark, rather makes do with noting the groups of animals in general.

As stated, the Midrashic literature on the story of the ark lists various species of realistic animals, such as lions, elephants, and ostriches. The impression is that the exegetists chose to focus on unique and rare animals that were familiar to those learning or listening to their homiletic interpretations. As we saw above, the Midrashim also relate to fantastic animals, for instance the giant *re'em* or the eternally living phoenix. It may be assumed that these creatures were included for several reasons:

A. The ancients believed that these were realistic creatures and therefore assumed that they too had entered the ark together with the other animals.

B. In practice, people in the ancient world had never had any encounter with the phoenix and the *re'em* and their portrayal was inspired, as stated, by realistic animals. The mythological animals aroused the imagination of

the ancients and they were eager to hear stories about them. Any mention of these creatures served to demonstrate and enhance the miracles of the Creation and the greatness of the God who had created them.

Through the unusual figures and qualities of the phoenix and the *re'em*, rabbinical sages tried to convey to their listeners theological and educational messages. Several messages are evident in the events that involve these two creatures:

A. The doctrine of reward and punishment – The story of Noah's salvation is indicative, in general, of the doctrine of divine reward and punishment, i.e., a system of rewarding good deeds and punishing bad deeds. Noah is a righteous and blameless man and therefore he is saved, while others in his generation are sinners and therefore God arranges for their annihilation by means of the flood. The phoenix is rewarded with a long life for its exemplary behavior.

According to one Midrash, it is rewarded with a long life because it did not eat of the Tree of Knowledge, an act that caused the advent of death in the world. According to another explanation, the phoenix achieves longevity because it was considerate of Noah who worked hard to feed the animals. As seen by the Midrash, the main sin of the generation of the flood was thievery, i.e., lack of consideration for one's fellow humans and their property. The phoenix's considerate behavior reflects purity and symbolizes the correction required of a corrupt society.

B. Execution of the divine plan – The biblical text does not indicate any specific event that hindered the process of entering the ark, and the verses themselves give the impression that it proceeded as planned (Genesis 7:7-9). The authors of the Midrash, in contrast, question this idyllic picture and describe several events and problems that occurred when entering the ark, such as disorder caused by Noah's contemporaries or lions that tried to invade the ark. In practice, all these factors were neutralized and the ark's plan was carried out. This element may also encompass the problems that arose concerning saving the *re'em*. According to the authors of the midrash, although it indeed could not enter the ark it too was eventually saved. Namely, the rescue plan included all creatures.

C. The “good” as generating the renewal and creation of life –

The flood was caused by the wickedness of human beings and the salvation was an outcome of good human deeds, such as those of Noah (Genesis 6:9; 7:1). Evil undermines the natural order and leads to annihilation of the world, while humans who are good and who demonstrate proper conduct lead to renewal of the world and its correction. The phoenix's cycle of life and death in the context of the story reflects the destruction of the world, on one hand, and its regeneration after the flood, on the other. Noah's blessing to the phoenix that it will live forever symbolizes the power of good deeds to change the reality of extinction, in contrast to the bad deeds of the sinners that result in destruction and ruin. In the long run, all living creatures are fated to die but the phoenix is the possibility, although exceptional, of eternal life as a reward for good deeds.

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