

ORIGEN

HOMILIES ON GENESIS AND EXODUS

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HOMILY II

AS WE BEGIN TO SPEAK ABOUT THE ARK which was constructed by Noah at God's command, let us see first of all what is related about it literally, and, proposing the questions which many are in the habit of presenting, let us search out also their solutions from the traditions which have been handed down to us by the forefathers. When we have laid foundations of this kind, we can ascend from the historical account to the mystical and allegorical understanding of the spiritual meaning and, if these contain anything secret, we can explain it as the Lord reveals knowledge of his word to us.

First, therefore, let us set forth these words which have been written. "And the Lord said to Noah," the text says, "the critical moment of every man has come before me, since the earth is filled with iniquity by them; and behold, I shall destroy them and the earth. Make, therefore, yourself an ark of squared planks; you shall make nests in the ark, and you shall cover it with pitch within and without. And thus you shall make the ark: the length of the ark three hundred cubits and the breadth fifty cubits and its height thirty cubits, you shall assemble and make the ark, and you shall finish it on top to a cubit. And you shall make a door in the side of the ark. You shall make two lower decks in it and three upper decks." And after a few words the text says, "And Noah did everything which the Lord God commanded him, thus he did it."

In the first place, therefore, we ask what sort of appearance and form we should understand of the ark. I think, to the extent that it is manifest from these things which are described, rising with four angles from the bottom, and the same having been drawn together gradually all the way to the top, it has been brought together into the space of one cubit. For thus it is related that at its bases three hundred cubits are laid down in length, fifty in breadth, and thirty are raised in height, but they are brought together to a narrow peak so that its breadth and length are a cubit.

But now on the inside indeed are placed those two decks, that is, comprising a double dwelling, which are called its lower decks. But the triple decks are above, as if we should say, constructed with three upper rooms. Now these separations of dwelling places appear to have been made for this reason, that the diverse kinds of animals or beasts could be separated more easily in individual rooms and whatever animals are tame and less active could be divided from the wild beasts. Those separations of dwellings, therefore, are called nests.

But the planks are said to have been squared. This was both so one piece could be fitted to the other more easily, and so the total assault of the waters might be held back when the flood overflowed, since it was protected, the joint having been coated with pitch within and without.

It has indeed been handed down to us, and not without probability, that the lower parts, which we said above were built double, which also separately are called double-decked, the upper parts which are called triple-decked excepted, were made double for this reason: since all the animals spent a whole year in the ark, and of course, it was necessary that food be provided that whole year and not only food, but also that places be prepared for wastes so that neither the animals themselves, nor especially the men, be plagued by the stench of excrement. They hand down, therefore, that the lower region itself, which is at the bottom, was given over and set aside for necessities of this kind. But the region above and contiguous to this one was allotted to storing food. And indeed it seemed necessary that animals be brought in from without for those beasts whose nature it was to feed on flesh, that feeding on their flesh they might be able to preserve their life for the sake of renewing offspring, but other provisions would be stored up for other animals, which their natural use demands.

They hand down, therefore, that the lower parts which are called double-decked were set aside for these uses, but the upper parts were allotted as a dwelling place for the beasts or animals, in

which the lower areas indeed were given as a dwelling place for wild beasts and fierce beasts or serpents, but the places contiguous to these in the upper areas were stables for domesticated animals. But above all, the abode for men was located at the highest point, since it is they who excel all in both honor and reason, so that just as man, by means of his reason and wisdom, is said to have dominion over all things which are on the earth, so also he might be higher in place and above all the animals which were gathered in the ark.

But they also hand down that the door which is said to have been made in the side was at that place so that it might have the lower areas, which the text called double-decked, below it and the upper areas, which the text called triple-decked, may be called upper from the location of the door and all the animals brought in thence might be separated with the appropriate distinction to their own places whatever they were, as we said above.

But the protection of the door itself is no longer performed by human methods. For how, after it is closed and there was no human outside the ark, could the door be coated with pitch on the outside, unless it was without doubt the work of divine power lest the waters gain entrance by an access which a human hand might not secure? For this reason, therefore, Scripture, although it had said about all other things, that Noah made the ark and brought in the animals and his sons and their wives, did not say of the door that Noah closed the door of the ark, but Scripture says that “The Lord God closed the door of the ark from without, and so the flood occurred.” It should be observed, however, that after the flood Noah is not said to have opened the door, but the “window,” when he sent forth “a raven to see whether the water had ceased upon the earth.”

But that Noah brought the food into the ark for all the animals or beasts which entered with him, hear from these words which the Lord speaks to Noah: “Take to yourself,” the text says, “from all the foods which are eaten and you shall gather it to yourself, and it shall be for you and them to eat.” But that Noah did those things which the Lord commanded him, hear Scripture saying: “And Noah did,” Scripture says, “everything which the Lord God commanded him, thus he did it.”

Certainly since Scripture related nothing about the places which we said were set apart for the excrement of the animals, but tradition preserves some things, it will appear opportune that silence has been maintained on this about which reason may sufficiently teach of its importance. And because it could less worthily be fitted to a spiritual meaning, rightly, therefore, Scripture, which rather fits its narratives to allegorical meanings, was silent about this.

Nevertheless, to the degree that the narrative concerns the force of the rains and the flood, no form could be given to the ark so fitting and suitable, so that, from the top, as if from a kind of roof brought to a narrow point, it might diffuse the fall of the rains, and continuing with stability four-cornered deep in the waters, the ark could neither be tipped nor sunk by the rush of the winds nor the pitching of the waves nor the restlessness of the animals which were within.

(2) But although all these things were composed with such great skill, some people present questions, and especially Apelles, who was a disciple indeed of Marcion, but was the inventor of another heresy greater than that one which he took up from his teacher. He, therefore, wishes to show that the writings of Moses contained nothing in themselves of the divine wisdom and nothing of the work of the Holy Spirit. With this intention he exaggerates sayings of this kind, and says that in no way was it possible to receive, in so brief a space, so many kinds of animals and their foods, which would be sufficient for a whole year. For when “two by two” from the unclean animals, that is, two males and two females—for this is what the repeated word signifies—but “seven by seven” from the clean animals, which is seven pairs, are said to have been led into the ark, how, he asks, could it happen that that space which is recorded could receive, at the least, four

elephants alone? And after he opposes each species in this manner, he adds above all to these words: "It is evident, therefore, that the story is invented; but if it is, it is evident that this Scripture is not from God."

But against these words we bring to the knowledge of our audience things which we learned from men who were skilled and versed in the traditions of the Hebrews and from our old teachers. The forefathers used to say, therefore, that Moses who, as Scripture testifies about him, was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," reckoned the number of cubits in this passage according to the art of geometry in which the Egyptians especially are skillful. For with geometricians, according to that computation which they call the second power, one cubit of a solid and square is considered as six if it is derived in general, or as three hundred if singly. If this computation, at least, be observed, spaces of such great length and breadth will be discovered in the measure of this ark that they could truly receive the whole world's offspring to restore it, and the revived seedbed of all living beings. Let these things be said, as much as pertains to the historical account, against those who endeavor to impugn the Scriptures of the Old Testament as containing certain things which are impossible and irrational.

(3) But now, since we have already previously prayed to him who alone can remove the veil from the reading of the Old Testament, let us attempt to inquire what spiritual edification also this magnificent construction of the ark contains.

I think, therefore, as I with my limited understanding am able to comprehend it, that that flood which nearly ended the world at that time contains a form of that end of the world which really will be. Because also the Lord himself announced saying: "For just as in the days of Noah they were buying, they were selling, they were building, they were marrying, they were giving in marriage, and the flood came and destroyed them all; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

In this statement the Lord clearly represents that flood which preceded and the end of the world which he says is to come as one and the same kind of flood. Therefore, just as it is said at that time to that Noah that he make an ark and bring into it along with himself not only his sons and neighbors, but also diverse kinds of animals, so also it is said by the Father in the consummation of the ages to our Noah, who alone is truly just and perfect, that he make himself an ark of squared planks and give it dimensions filled with heavenly mysteries. For this is described in the Psalm where it says: "Ask of me and I will give you the Gentiles for your inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession."

Therefore he constructs the ark and makes nests in it, that is, certain chambers in which animals of various kind are received. The prophet also speaks of these chambers: "Go, my people, into your chambers, hide yourself a while until the fury of my anger pass away." This people, therefore, which is saved in the Church, is compared to all those whether men or animals which are saved in the ark.

But since neither the merit of all nor the progress in faith is one, therefore, also that ark does not offer one abode for all, but there are two lower decks and three upper decks and compartments are separated in it to show that also in the Church, although all are contained within the one faith and are washed in the one baptism, progress, however, is not one and the same for all, "but each one in his own order."

These, indeed, who live by rational knowledge and are capable not only of ruling themselves but also of teaching others, since very few are found, represent the few who are saved with Noah himself and are united with him in the closest relationship, just as also our Lord, the true Noah, Christ Jesus, has few intimates, few sons and relatives, who are participants in his word and

capable of his wisdom. And these are the ones who are placed in the highest position and are gathered in the uppermost part of the ark.

A multitude of other irrational animals or even beasts is held in the lower decks, and especially a multitude of those beasts whose fierce raging the charm of faith has not tamed. But of this group those are a little superior which, though falling short in reason, nevertheless, preserve more simplicity and innocence.

And thus by ascending through the individual levels of the dwellings, one arrives at Noah himself, whose name means rest or righteous, who is Christ Jesus. For what Lamech his father says is not appropriate to the ancient Noah. For “this one,” he says, “shall give us rest from the labors and the sorrows of our hands and from the earth which the Lord God cursed.” For how shall it be true that the ancient Noah gave rest to that Lamech or to that people who were then contained in the lands? How is there a cessation from sorrows and labor in the times of Noah? How is the curse which the Lord had placed on the earth removed when rather both the divine wrath is shown to be greater and God is reported to say, “I am sorry that I made man on the earth,” and again he says, “I will destroy all flesh which is upon the earth,” and the destruction of the living is given, above all, as an indication of the greatest displeasure?

But if you look to our Lord Jesus Christ of whom it is said: “Behold the lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world,” and of whom it is said again: “Being made a curse for us that he might redeem us from the curse of the law,” and again when Scripture says, “Come to me you who labor and are burdened and I will refresh you and you shall find rest for your souls,” you will find him to be the one who truly has given rest to men and has freed the earth from the curse with which the Lord God cursed it.

Therefore, it is said to this spiritual Noah who has given rest to men and has taken away the sin of the world: “You shall make yourself an ark of squared planks.”

(4) Let us see, therefore, what the squared planks are. That is squared which in no way sways to and fro, but in whatever way you turn it, it stands firm with trustworthy and solid stability. Those are the planks which bear all the weight either of the animals within or the floods without. I think these are the teachers in the Church, the leaders, and zealots of the faith who both encourage the people who have been placed within the Church by a word of admonition and the grace of the teaching, and who resist, by the power of the word and the wisdom of reason, those without, whether heathens or heretics, who assail the Church and stir up floods of questions and storms of strife.

But do you wish to see that the divine Scripture understands trees to be rational? Let us review what was written by the prophet Ezechiel. “And it came to pass,” Scripture says, “in the eleventh year, the third month, the first day of the month, that the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ‘Son of man, speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt and his multitude: “To whom do you make yourself similar in your exaltation? Behold the Assyrian was like a cypress in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and thick with leaves and lofty in height. His top was among the clouds. Water nourished him, and the deep exalted him and brought all its rivers around him and it sent forth its gatherings to all the trees of the plain. Therefore his height was exalted above all the trees of the plain.” ’ ” And a little further on the text says, “The many cypresses in the paradise of God and the pines are not equal to its branches, and the fir trees were not equal to them. No tree in the paradise of God was like him, and all the trees of the paradise of God’s delight were jealous of him.”

Do you perceive of what trees or what kind of trees the prophet speaks? How could he be describing the cypress of Lebanon to which all the trees which are in the paradise of God could not be compared? And he also adds this at the end, that all the trees which are in the paradise of

God are jealous of it, showing clearly, in the spiritual sense, that the trees which are in the garden of God are to be said to be rational since he describes a certain jealousy among them against those trees which are in Lebanon.

Whence, to say this also in digression, consider if perhaps that also which is written, "Everyone who hangs on a tree is accursed of God," ought not to be so understood even as also that which is said elsewhere: "Cursed be the man who has hope in man." For we ought to depend on God alone and on no other, even if someone be said to proceed from the paradise of God, as also Paul says: "Even if we or an angel of heaven preach a gospel to you other than that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema." But enough of this for now.

Meanwhile you have seen what the squared planks are which are arranged by the spiritual Noah as a kind of wall and defense for these who are within from the floods which come upon them from without, which planks are coated "with pitch within and without." For Christ, the architect of the Church, does not wish you to be such as those "who on the outside indeed appear to men to be just, but on the inside are tombs of the dead," but he wishes you to be both holy in body without and pure in heart within, on guard on all sides and protected by the power of purity and innocence. This is what it means to be coated with pitch within and without.

(5) Next the text speaks of the length and breadth and height of the ark and numbers are proposed in these dimensions indeed which have been consecrated by great mysteries. But before we discuss the numbers, let us see what this is which Scripture calls length and breadth and height.

The Apostle, in a certain passage, when he was speaking very mystically about the mystery of the cross, says as follows: "That you might know what is the length and breadth and depth." Now depth and height mean the same thing except that height appears to measure space from the lower regions to the higher, but depth begins from the higher and descends to the lower. Consequently, therefore, the spirit of God discloses figures of great mysteries through both Moses and Paul. For since Paul was preaching the mystery of the condescension of Christ, he used the term depth as if Christ comes from the upper regions to the lower. But Moses is describing the restoration of those who are recalled by Christ from the lower regions to the higher and celestial ones, from the destruction and ruin of the world, as from the violent death of a flood. For this reason Moses does not speak about depth, but height in the measure of the ark, as it were, where one ascends from the earthly and lowly regions to the heavenly and exalted ones.

Numbers also are proposed: three hundred cubits long, fifty wide, thirty high.

Three hundred is three one hundreds. Now the number one hundred is shown to be full and perfect in everything and to contain the mystery of the whole rational creation, as we read in the Gospels where it says that "a certain man having a hundred sheep, when he lost one of them, left the ninety-nine in the mountains and descended to seek that one which he had lost and when it was found he carried it back on his shoulders and placed it with those ninety-nine which had not been lost." This hundred, therefore, is the number of the whole rational creation, since it does not subsist from itself but has descended from the Trinity and has received the length of its life, that is the grace of immortality, from the Father through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is stated as tripled in as much as it is this which is increased to perfection by the grace of the Trinity and which, by knowledge of the Trinity, may restore to the three hundred the one fallen by ignorance from the one hundred.

The width has the number fifty which has been consecrated as the number of forgiveness and remission. For according to the law there was a remission in the fiftieth year, that is, so that if someone had sold off his property, he might receive it back; if a free man had come into slavery,

he might regain his freedom; a debtor might receive remission; an exile might return to his fatherland.

Therefore Christ, the spiritual Noah, in his ark in which he frees the human race from destruction, that is, in his Church, has established in its breadth the number fifty, the number of forgiveness. For if he had not given forgiveness of sins to those who believe, the breadth of the Church would not have been spread around the world.

But the number thirty of the height contains a mystery like the number three hundred. For what a hundred multiplied by three makes there, ten multiplied by three makes here.

But the sum is reduced to one, the number of the total construction, because “there is one God the Father from whom are all things, and one Lord” and “one faith of the Church, one baptism, one body and one spirit” and all things hasten to the one goal of the perfection of God.

But also if you who hear these words direct your thoughts to the Holy Scriptures in your leisure, you will discover many great events to be comprised under the number thirty or fifty. Joseph was thirty years old when he was led out of prison and received the rule of all Egypt that he might divert the calamity of an imminent famine by divine provision. Jesus is reported to have been thirty years old when he came to baptism and “saw the heavens divided and the spirit of God coming upon himself in the form of a dove,” where also for the first time the mystery of the Trinity began to be disclosed. And you will discover many things like these.

But you will also find the fiftieth day a festival for the consecration of the new fruits, and a fiftieth of the spoils of the Madianites is taken away for the Lord. But you will find also Abraham conquering the Sodomites with three hundred men, and Gideon overcomes with three hundred men who lap water with their tongue.

The door, indeed, which is placed neither at the front nor above but on the side obliquely, since it is the time of divine wrath—for “the day of the Lord is a day of wrath and anger,” as it is written; for although some may appear to be saved, many, nevertheless, whom their own deserts condemn, are destroyed and perish—the door is placed obliquely, that what the prophet says might be disclosed: “If you will go athwart with me, I also shall go with you with anger athwart.”

Next, let us see also about that which the text calls separately “two lower decks” and “three upper decks,” if perhaps these words may not reveal that which the Apostle said: “In the name of Jesus every knee is bowed of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth,” and it be shown that what the Apostle calls under the earth is the lowest of all the decks indeed in the ark, and that next higher deck is the terrestrial region, and the three upper decks which the text mentions are, all together, the heavenly regions, but in these the merits are distinguished of those who can, according to the apostle Paul, ascend “even to the third heaven.”

But “nests and nests” because there are many in the ark, show that there are many dwelling places with the Father.

But what other figure ought we to observe about the animals and beasts and cattle and the other diverse living beings than either the one which Isaias makes known when he says that in the kingdom of Christ the wolf is with the lamb, the panther with the kid, the lion and the ox go to pasture together and their young eat chaff together, and furthermore a small child—such, doubtless, as the Savior said: “Unless you be converted and become as this child you shall not enter the kingdom of God”—will put its hand in the hole of an asp and suffer no harm? Or, also that figure which Peter teaches is now already present in the Church when he relates that he had seen a vision in which all the four-footed creatures and beasts of the earth and birds of heaven were contained within one sheet of faith tied together at the four corners of the Gospels?

(6) But since God orders that the ark which we are attempting to describe be constructed not only with two decks but also with three, let us also give attention to join to this twofold exposition which preceded also a third in accordance with God's precept.

For the literal meaning which preceded is placed first as a kind of foundation at the lower levels. This mystical interpretation was second, being higher and loftier. Let us attempt, if we can, to add a moral exposition as the third level, granting that even this text itself appears to contain a mystery not different from this very exposition we are undertaking in that it neither said "with two decks" only and was silent, nor "with three decks" alone and ceased, but when it had said "with two decks," it added also "with three decks." For "with three decks" denotes this threefold exposition.

But the historical succession cannot always be established in the divine Scriptures, but sometimes is lacking as, for example, when it is said, "Thorns will grow in the hand of a drunkard" and when it is said in the temple built by Solomon, "The sound of hammer and ax was not heard in the house of God" and again in Leviticus when "the leprosy of a wall and a hide and a cloth is ordered to be examined by the priests and purified." Because of these things, therefore, and things like them, the ark is constructed not only "with three decks," but also "with two decks," that we might know that there is not always a triple explanation in the divine Scriptures because a literal explanation does not always follow for us, but sometimes only the mingled meaning of the double explanation.

Let us attempt, therefore, to discuss also a third exposition at the moral level.

If there is anyone who, while evils are increasing and vices are overflowing, can turn from the things which are in flux and passing away and fallen, and can hear the word of God and the heavenly precepts, this man is building an ark of salvation within his own heart and is dedicating a library, so to speak, of the divine word within himself. He is erecting faith, love, and hope as its length, breadth and height. He stretches out faith in the Trinity to the length of life and immortality. He establishes the breadth of love with the compassion of gentleness and kindness. He raises the height of hope to heavenly and exalted places. For while he walks upon the earth he has his "citizenship in heaven." But he brings the sum of his acts back to one. For he knows that "all indeed run, but one receives the palm of victory," of course, being that one who was not changeable with a variety of thoughts and instability of mind.

But he does not construct this library from planks which are unhewn and rough, but from planks which have been squared and arranged in a uniform line, that is, not from the volumes of secular authors, but from the prophetic and apostolic volumes. For these authors, who have been hewn by diverse temptations, all vices having been curtailed and excised, contain life which has been squared and set free in every part. For the authors of secular books can indeed be called "lofty trees" and "shady trees"—for Israel is accused of having fornicating "under every lofty and shady tree"—because they speak indeed in a lofty manner and use flowery eloquence; they have not, however, acted as they have spoken. They cannot, therefore, be called "squared planks" because life and speech will by no means be equal in them.

If, therefore, you build an ark, if you gather a library, gather it from the words of the prophets and apostles or of those who have followed them in the right lines of faith. You shall make it "with two decks" and "with three decks." From this library learn the historical narratives; from it recognize "the great mystery" which is fulfilled in Christ and in the Church. From it also learn how to correct habits, to curtail vices, to purge the soul and draw it off from every bond of captivity, setting up in it "nests and nests" of the various virtues and perfections. By all means "you shall cover it with pitch within and without," "bearing faith in your heart, offering confession with your

mouth,” having knowledge within, works without, advancing pure in heart within, spotless in body without.

In this ark, therefore, let us place, meanwhile, at the moral level, either that library of divine books or a faithful soul. You ought also to bring in animals of every kind not only clean but also unclean. Now we can easily say that the clean animals indeed can be understood as memory, learning, understanding, examination and discernment of those things which we read, and other things like these. But it is difficult to speak about the unclean animals which also are named “two by two.” Nevertheless we can, in such difficult passages, dare so much: I think that concupiscence and wrath, which are in every soul, are necessarily said to be unclean in the sense that they serve to make man sin. But in the sense that neither succession of posterity is renewed without concupiscence nor can any correction or discipline exist without anger, they are said to be necessary and must be preserved.

And although these things discussed may now appear not to be in the moral but in the natural sense, nevertheless, we have treated for edification the ideas which could occur to us at present.

To be sure, if someone can, at leisure, bring together Scripture with Scripture, and compare divine Scripture, and fit together “spiritual things with spiritual,” we are not unmindful that he will discover in this passage many secrets of a profound and hidden mystery which we cannot now bring forth either because of the shortness of time or the fatigue of the listeners.

Let us pray, however, the mercy of the omnipotent God to make us “not only hearers of” his “word,” but also “doers” and to bring upon our souls also a flood of his water and destroy in us what he knows should be destroyed and quicken what he knows should be quickened, through Christ our Lord and through his Holy Spirit. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.