

### III

## THE COVENANT

### AND THE STORY OF THE GREAT FLOOD

*And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth. Genesis 9:16*

It was still very dark, with a heavy chill in the air, when activity resumed in the camp. Mashda awoke and quickly got up, rolled his sleeping mat around his precious bundle of possessions and began carrying it, along with the rest of the household goods, to the camels and donkeys outside. There he met his father and brothers and they packed each pack animal one-by-one. As the animals were being loaded, his mother and sisters, with the help of other women in the camp, quickly took down the tent and that too was packed. The caravan was on the move just as the eastern sky became streaked with color of the rising sun.

They headed towards the outer edge of the river valley, following a fringe of date palm groves. To the left of the road, towards the south, was an expansive desolate wasteland, as far as the eye could see, without any green or life visible anywhere. The animals wanted to turn right, to the lush green fields of grain of the Mesopotamian river valley, and it was on this side that the boys had to constantly work. Mashda and the other shepherd boys with him, would stretch out their shepherds' staffs to guide the flocks forward, away from the right side of the road. It was a constant challenge to keep them moving in the right direction. As the day progressed, the heat increased, with the sun reflecting off the desert and intensely radiating on the left side of their bodies. It was a relief whenever they were able to pass through date palm groves, which provided at least a little shade and break from the blazing sun.

They arrived at their planned camp by late afternoon. They were not going to set up tents, but sleep under the stars. The women began collecting dried animal dung and plant debris to start fires for the evening meal while the men unloaded the animals. Women placed four wet lumps of river clay around some of the fires and rested domed metal pans over them, with the dome facing upward. On this, they would either pour a flour and water batter that baked as a pancake style of flat bread or a sourdough yeast dough circle, carefully flattened, which baked as a pita style of flat bread. These would be eaten with cheese, dates and figs. On other fires was placed pots of lentils, herbs and water for a stew. Children gathered dates, mulberries and figs from nearby trees. The older boys took care of the animals, providing them with the pre-cut reeds and willow as well as water. The older girls milked the animals. Everyone had much to do, in spite of being exhausted from the day's journey.

Lot quickly gathered the same young men as the day before. Looking at the older boys, he said, "Tomorrow's journey will be easier than today's since we have left most of the fields of grain behind. Tomorrow, I want you to travel ahead of the caravan and

attempt to hunt gazelle for our evening meal. That will be a special treat.” He then looked at Mashda and said, “You can go too. The other boys should be able to handle the flocks tomorrow without you.” This excited Mashda. His own name meant gazelle in Sumerian, though he had never attended a gazelle hunt in his life. He was very happy with the opportunity to do so in the morning.

It wasn’t until after the evening meal that the travelers could begin to genuinely rest. The men gathered around the fires while the women finished cleaning up and culturing the evening’s milk. Mashda sat around the fire of his great uncle, the patriarch Abram, son of his great-grandfather, Terah. Abram with his eyes sparkling from the light of the flickering fire, began to speak: “You have heard it said of old, how the great Gilgamesh searched the world for the way to escape death. And on one of his many journeys, he came across an old man, Utnapishtim, who told him a story from ages past, the story of how the gods brought a flood that swallowed the earth:

*Reed house, reed house! Wall, wall!  
O man of Šuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu  
Tear down the house and build a boat!  
Abandon wealth and seek living beings!  
Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings!  
Make the seed of all living beings go up into the boat.  
The boat which you are to build,  
its dimensions must measure equal to each other:  
its length must correspond to its width.  
Roof it over like the Apsu.<sup>1 2</sup>*

The gods, led by Enlil, desired to remove humanity from the earth, but the god Ea warned Utnapishtim in a dream. Utnapishtim and his craftsmen built a large boat. He then loaded it with his family, the craftsmen, and ‘the seed of all living creatures.’ The waters of the abyss rose up, and it stormed for six days. Even the gods were frightened by the flood’s fury. Upon seeing the complete destruction of mankind, the gods repented and wept. The waters covered everything but the top of the mountain Nisur, where the boat landed. After seven more days, Utnapishtim released a dove, but it returned when it found nowhere else to land. He next released a sparrow, but it also returned, and then he released a raven, which did not return. Thus, he knew the waters had receded enough to leave the ark. Utnapishtim made a sacrifice to the gods. He and his wife were given immortality and lived at the end of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

The story of Gilgamesh goes on to say how the goddess Ishtar placed her necklace in the sky, as a reminder to the gods and a pledge to mankind that there would

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<sup>1</sup> The heavens.

<sup>2</sup> Translated by Maureen Gallery Kovacs.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from: Sandars, N. K. (transl.). **The Epic of Gilgamesh**, Penguin Books, Ltd., Harmondsworth, England, 1972.

be no more floods. But now I tell you this story according to the one true God, the God who created all of mankind, the heavens and the earth, the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life which we have also heard about in our ancient stories of Sumer:

God saw the wickedness of man and the evil imaginings of his heart. And the Lord regretted creating man. And the Lord said, 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man and beast, bird and creeping thing.' But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Noah was a just man and walked right with God. The Lord said to Noah, 'The earth is filled with violence because of man. I will destroy him from the face of the earth. Build an ark of wood according to the instructions I give you. For I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all living things on the land. But with you, I will establish my covenant, you and your sons, and your wife, and your sons' wives. Bring into the ark two of every living animal, to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Bring seven pairs of every clean animal that can be used for sacrifice.' Noah did all that was commanded of him. And it came to pass that the waters of the flood came and all the fountains of the deep gushed up, and the windows of the heavens poured down. It rained forty days and forty nights. But God remembered Noah, and every living thing with him in the ark. God made the rain stop and wind pass over the earth so that the waters receded. After a hundred and fifty days, the ark came to rest upon the mountains of Ararat. Noah opened the window of the ark and sent forth a raven. It flew back and forth until the waters dried off from the earth. He sent forth a dove. But the dove found no rest and she returned to him. After seven more days, he sent out the dove again. It returned in the evening with an olive leaf in its beak. He waited seven more days and sent the dove a third time. This time it did not return. Noah and his family, and the animals with them, all left the ark. And Noah built an altar unto the Lord and took every clean beast and every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelled the sweet offering and said in His heart, 'I will not again curse the ground for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. Nor will I again kill every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. And I will establish my covenant with you, that never again will all life be destroyed by a flood, nor shall a flood come again to destroy all the earth.' And God said, 'This is the token of the covenant which I am making between you and Myself and every living creature that is with you, for all generations to come. I will set my rainbow in the clouds, and it shall be a reminder of my covenant.'"

Abram finished by saying: "We are a chosen people for a special covenant. As with the great *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we have left our homes and abandoned our wealth and possessions. We are on a journey to know the one true God and to find everlasting life."