

Joanna Lumley's Quest For Noah's Ark

Directed by Mark Bennett. Produced by Rebecca Harris. Executive Producers: Clive Tulloh and Joanna Lumley. Cinematography by Will Churchill. Edited by Steve Templa

Presenter: Joanna Lumley. Voice: John Bowe.

Television length: 65 minutes. Production Company BBC Productions.

Television release: December 2012. Rating 80%.

Joanna Lumley



Image courtesy of Wikipedia

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REVIEW

What is here is definitely worth seeing, for interest, for information, for those who like mysteries and historical controversies and the sheer pleasure of watching a well-made documentary. Unfortunately this should have been a two episode effort, at least. Much that should have been mentioned but was not is written in here. This is not the filmmakers' fault. Perhaps even a two episode effort would not have been able to supply all the needed detail.



Whimsical as this representation is, it does show approximately the right size of the ark going by the measurements in genesis. It also shows the story's impossibility. Note the Australian kangaroos followed by wolves, the polar bear and the tigers following giraffes – and every creature in neat lines, going in two by two without herders. Public Domain/Library of Congress

This is the sixth documentary on the topic of Noah's ark watched by this reviewer and while all were worthwhile, not one gave a fully detailed account with all the important information. All had a focus on some aspect which shaped their presentation.

Joanna Lumley has no axe to grind, no idea to prove, nor does she have any belief or unbelief to defend. She goes on a quest to find what is the truth of the Noah's Ark story and she takes us with us.

As it appears in the Old Testament (The Book of Genesis Chapters 6 to 9), Noah is six hundred years old, a righteous patriarch existing in a world that has become so evil that God regrets having created it and will destroy it all by flood. Only Noah, his wife, three sons and their wives will survive from humanity and they will do this by building a great ark in which the creatures of the earth will also be accommodated, some by sevens, others two by two for the survival of the species. The Ark is described in detail. It is to be made of gopherwood, be of three stories, each ten cubits high and be three hundred cubits long and thirty wide. After it is built and all the creatures and foods are collected the flood begins. It lasts forty days and forty nights, killing every living thing on the earth and rises even higher than the mountains. The ark lasts 150 days on the waters which cover the earth until it rests not on Mount Ararat as most accounts (including Lumley's) state but "upon the mountains of Ararat" From there Noah sends out a raven to search for dry land but it returns. When he sends out a dove it also returns on the first try, but on the second returns with an olive branch, so Noah knows that the flood has abated, dry land exists. On the third try the dove does not return; the land is habitable and God orders Noah that all aboard the ark will leave the ark. Noah sacrifices in gratitude. They will replenish the earth by being fruitful and multiplying. God creates the rainbow to permanently serve as a reminder to Noah, all creatures and to himself that he will never destroy the earth by flood again.

Lumley comes to that story with an open mind; asking what truth is there in it? She wants to know if evidence exists and what any evidence

will lead to. She knows of the 1959 aerial photograph of the boatlike shape high on the slopes of Mount Ararat. As she says when she is filmed standing on top of it, is a perfect match with the Genesis account, being thirty cubits high, three hundred cubits long and thirty cubits wide. Allowing for damage and being changed by age and weathering, this could well be a boat/ark/vessel of petrified wood, covered by grass and adhering mud. It has the sharp edges, slightly bowed shape, tapering to a brow, general symmetry and regular height of a water going vessel. However it is not a vessel. What it is, a geological professor in Ankara explains to Lumley, is a sliver of the mountain which has been shaken off the main rocky mountainside, slid down the slope and been shaped by weather. The expert shows how this happened with computer images which are from the site. He has it right.

An American documentary made decades ago pitted a sceptic and a Christian against each other and transported them to Mount Ararat for the show down. They disputed if this was the ark or a natural formation, Drilling into the supposed ark revealed nothing man made and the sides were rock and mud. The Christian fundamentalist abandoned his belief that this was the ark. Could this natural formation be the origin of the story? The remoteness of Mount Ararat, its location of being on a much disputed, tense border and its height and difficult climb precluded early investigations. In 1916 a pilot flew over the mountain and described what must be this feature as the ark. Interestingly in 1829 the first Europeans to climb Ararat said that there was nothing like the ark there. The sliver, if it existed in 1829, would have gained comment or investigation. Or was it investigated and found to be what it was and then not mentioned? Mount Ararat has been a source of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions many times, from the days of the ancient world on. In July 1840 a major eruption caused a tremendously powerful landslide, leaving nearly ten thousand dead, destroying a nearby moastery and even a village. Did this powerful force create the sliver? Earlier, similar eruptions causing landslides may have done this – and may have buried any evidence of an ark.



Mount Ararat.

Both images courtesy of Wikipedia



The Quest For Noah's Ark should have had this interesting and important information. It did include the gigantic ancient anchor stone with its tying hole. Supposedly from the ark, from where it rests Ararat can clearly be seen through its ropehole. This does present interesting evidence, for what is an ancient type of anchor, so heavy that it would need elephants to drag it, doing in the middle of a near desert, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest large body of water? Lumley also presents the other evidence for some factual basis to the ark story. In the Sumerian king list a break appears between kings and this break refers to a great flood. This must have been catastrophic to be recorded in this way.

Lumley changed direction literally and figuratively and got the Moslem version where the ark did not rest on the Ararat Mountains, but far to the south, near the dangerous Syrian border. She visited one of Noah's supposed tombs, venerated by Moslems. She points out that in Islam Noah was a major saint and is physically a very big man. Too big. The length of his beautiful sepulchre could hold four big men if lined up head to foot.

It is at this point that going by voice tones and facial expression Lumley apparently abandons any belief in even a legendary Noah.

She then focuses on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Mesopotamian story which has too many similarities (or borrowings?) to Noah's story to be coincidental. Like the Noah story it is around five thousand years old, was retold orally and was written up seven centuries before Christ. Here Gilgamesh in his search for immortality meets an immortal, Utnapishtim the Faraway, survivor of the great flood, which was caused by one of the gods tired of the noise made by an overpopulated earth. Being supernaturally warned Utnapishtim and "all my household" built a square vessel six stories high and a 120 cubits square. He loads it with his family and people and animals that are his and others wild and tame. After a killer flood of six days and nights his vessel rests on a mountain where three times he sends birds out to find land. Once again the birds await seven days before returning. The birds are doves and ravens and on

the third try he knows the land is safe. Therefore he sacrifices to the gods and is given immortality.

On Gujarat on the north-west coast of India another similar story emerges from amongst the ancient tales of the Hindu religion. Here a righteous King favoured by the gods and warned by them, saves himself and his family from a great flood by boarding a vessel while the unrighteous perish. Lumley presents an expert and with him, she describes the ancient sea-going trading patterns between Gujarat and Mesopotamia and the suggestion is that the story was carried along the trade route to Mesopotamia.

That could be, but it could also be that the story went along the seafaring route in the other direction and nobody has proved that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is older than Genesis. That the Genesis story must be older than some indigenous variations becomes obvious when other versions turn up – amongst the Mandan Indians of Minnesota, Australian Aborigines and in Mexico. The most likely explanation is that these examples came from early Christian missionaries and in its essentials was absorbed into local folk cultures, while its origins were not.

This existence of variations on the Genesis story is not one of the many problems with proving the historic veracity of the Great Flood story. The essential problem is that the evidence as given is at best extremely unlikely and frequently impossible.

The Quest For Noah's Ark has replicas of vessels from around Noah's supposed time. They are made of strapped reeds and none are wider or deeper than five metres, to be generous. As for the length, they are not even half Noah's three hundred cubits.

Recently Americans tried proving that using only ancient tools techniques and materials they could rebuild the ark – and they did, sort of. They built a gigantic coracle and it floated and could be controlled.

However what they could not do, just on sheer space, was fit it with all the plants and animals “of all the earth.” Even that assumes that Noah travelled to Southern Africa to get cheetahs, gazelles, giraffes, zebras and



Noah's Tomb The photograph shows about half the length.

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merkats, stopped off in India for assorted species of bears, cobras and monkeys, made it to Kalimantan for the orangotangs and did not forget the Australian kangaroos, galahs, kookaburras, platapus and koalas on the long long trip home. It is more liely that a chronicler in Sumeria did not know of the world's immense variety. Somehow on Noah's 150 day long survivalist voyage, all these creatures were fed, their different diets, even if the predators ate only flesh - which could not possibly last so long. And if after every living thing on earth has been killed by the flood (as it indeed would be, being 150 days under water) did the creatures live on when they came off the ark? Lumley does ask the question concerning food and ark supplies and in a Turkish bazaar tastes a nutritious, traditional long Turkish staple which many could eat. In rural England she meets a raven and its trainer and has fun as she enquires about



Noah's Tomb Turkey. This the modern exterior to one of five tombs supposedly for Noah.

By MikaelF - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,

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Ancient Mesopotamian terracotta relief (c. 2250 — 1900 BC) showing Gilgamesh slaying the Bull of Heaven,^[39] an episode described in Tablet VI of the Epic of Gilgamesh

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retrieving ravens, which they do. So ravens flew home, no one can accuse Lumley of fudging on investigating evidence, but the conclusion of Noah's survivalist trip leave worlds' questions that are impossible to answer. If this happened five thousand years ago are we to believe that absolutely all of the flora and fauna evolved with all their myriad variations and migrations and repopulated the earth in that time? What of its humans? Would five thousand years to spread millions from the Turkish mountains to Pacific Islands and to the Andes, from Scotland to Terra Del Feugo, from Tasmania and the Kalahari desert to Kamatchaka and Nepal, would it be time enough? Even if scripture's literalist defenders say this applies only to the Biblical lands of the Middle East and argue for big families, this still taxes credulity.

Then there is the great flood. Mount Ararat is nearly 17,000 feet (5,137 metres) high. For a flood to reach this height the rest of the world would be inundated and yes the five thousand years and many more thousands of years would be needed to repopulate the earth because everything except Mount Everest and forty other high peaks would be inundated. As the five thousand years scenario must be impossible so is the flood, at least globally. Even if localised it cannot be, as the water could not have stayed in that vastly different geographical area for 150 days. Unless all the world was indeed flooded, the waters would have drained off fairly quickly from the mountain slopes to not far away lower lying areas. Eventually flowing into what is now the Persian Gulf. History, science and archaeology sometimes support Biblical accounts, not this time.

So why is this important? Three religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity give accounts of this story and their believers state that their sacred writings are either the word of God, are given to men by God or is directly inspired by God. If that is so, how could it fail to be real? How could it be impossible? The Noah's ark story is impossible as history. It remains at best extremely dubious as legend, with only the anchor stone and the kings' list as possible positive evidence.

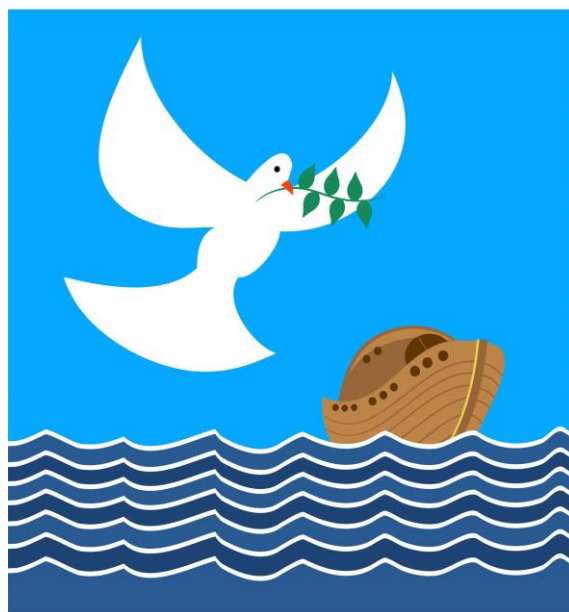
Joanna Lumley concludes by describing it as a kind of fairy story, but one that shows us that good can triumph over bad. She is on to something,

for as either fairy tale, fable or myth the story works. Myth has come to mean in common parlance something false, faked, non-existent in the sense of a fallacy, but go back to the original meanings of myth, fairy tale and fables. They were cautionary tales, learning experiences, the law, morality and wisdom of a tribe, a people or a kingdom. They were not conveyed in complex scientific narratives meant only for people with Phds. The Bible was meant for everybody. These learning aspects were embodied in characters and in narratives which may have actually happened as narrated. Supernatural and magical elements abound in these stories, but they are representations of powerful forces existing in the material world giving a message best learned. As one Christian said when questioned about details: ‘Focus on what God is trying to tell us.’

What is clear here is that the prudent who are diligent, industrious and can heed warnings can survive the most catastrophic events.

What is also clear is the merciless, overwhelming and titanic power of nature and in a world of climate change the story of the great flood is still a warning five thousand years on.

A last lesson is the true reality of Noah’s Ark: these days it is called Planet Earth.



Artist: Dawn Hudson Public Domain Clip Art

