

## "Noah's Flood" Theory Questioned

Many scientists accept the idea that the biblical story of Noah's flood was inspired by a sudden inundation of the Black Sea by the Mediterranean 7500 years ago. But new research suggests that no such flood occurred.

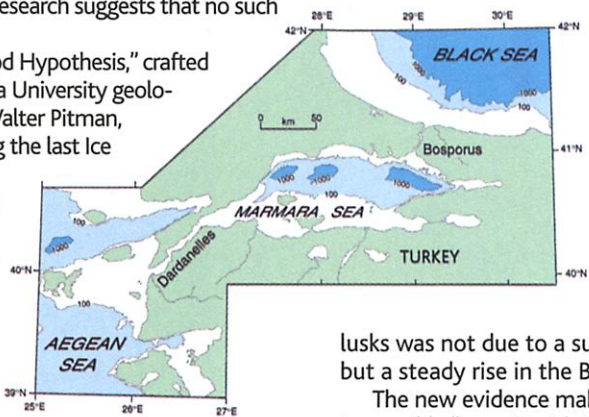
The "Noah's Flood Hypothesis," crafted in 1997 by Columbia University geologists Bill Ryan and Walter Pitman, proposes that during the last Ice Age some 18,000 years ago, sea levels dropped, and the Black Sea became a freshwater lake isolated from the Mediterranean Sea. When the climate warmed, melting glaciers boosted sea level until the salty Mediterranean burst through the Bosphorus and filled the Black Sea. The key to the theory is the sudden appearance of saltwater mollusks in 7500-year-old Black Sea sediments.

But a group of geologists led by Ali Aksu of

Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, says there probably was no flood. Seismic images of sediments in the Mediterranean's Marmara Sea, across the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, reveal a 10,000-year-old buried delta

formed by water flowing out of the Black Sea. The images suggest that the flow reversed and salty water began pouring into the Black Sea about 9000 years ago, the scientists report in an article in press at *Marine Geology*. So the appearance of the saltwater mollusks was not due to a sudden flood, Aksu says, but a steady rise in the Black Sea's salt content.

The new evidence makes "the flood hypothesis impossible," says David Piper of the Geological Survey of Canada. But Ryan says the new theory can't explain why there are 9000-year-old beach deposits 350 feet below the surface of the Black Sea, suggesting that the sea dried up after the delta formed.



Scientists may be fighting President George W. Bush tooth and nail over his efforts to ban therapeutic cloning. But three of them sprang to his defense last week after a reporter asked a flippant question about whether Bush appeared in person to be "dumb."

## Kind Words for Bush

Speaking at a seminar at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Hopkins psychiatrist Paul McHugh, a member of the president's bioethics panel, replied that when Bush addressed the panel earlier this year, he came across as "earnest" and "very intelligent." Ruth R. Faden, director of the Hopkins Bioethics Institute, chimed in, describing the president's stem cell policy speech last August as nothing less than "a remarkable bioethics lecture." And Hopkins stem cell researcher John Gearhart said that although Bush upset some scientists by putting restrictions on available cell lines, he did something "even more important" for researchers this spring by ruling that university scientists don't have to retreat to separate facilities when doing research on nonapproved lines (*Science*, 12 April, p. 235).

McHugh noted that none of the three is a Republican.



King Faisal hospital and research complex.

Faisal center. "We believe biotechnology could someday be the new oil of Saudi Arabia," Bahabri said earlier this month at the BIO 2002 meeting in Toronto.

Research will be compatible with "Islamic sensitivities,"

Saudi Arabian scientists are gearing up to work with human adult and fetal stem cells as part of a new initiative to establish Jeddah as the Arabian peninsula's capital for biomedical research.

Jeddah BioCity will be a research facility with close ties to the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, a network of laboratories and hospitals. Construction of labs has already begun, according to the project's initiator, Sultan Bahabri, a rheumatologist at the

## Stem Cells Arrive in Saudi Arabia

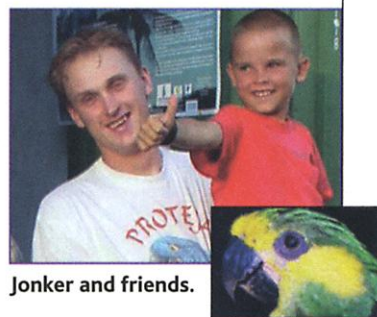
says Bahabri. Scientists will be allowed to isolate germ line cells from aborted fetuses as long as they come from miscarriages or from abortions done to save the mother's life. But the use of stem cells from human embryos is currently outlawed. Discussions on the issue are under way between scientists and Islamic scholars, and Bahabri hopes that the government will soon allow scientists to get excess embryos from the country's 30-odd fertility clinics.

## Parrot Researcher Released

A Dutch biology student and parrot aficionado who had been held hostage in Colombia for 8 months arrived back safely in the Netherlands last week, after extensive negotiations between his Colombian colleagues and his kidnappers. He says he was generally well treated during his captivity but was "bored to death."

Hoping to earn his master's degree at the University of Leiden, Roelant Jonker, 28, traveled to Colombia last August to study the breeding behavior of the yellow-eared parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*), a species believed extinct until recently. In October, he was captured by the Marxist FARC movement, which has turned kidnapping of prominent Colombians and foreigners into a cottage industry. Jonker, who describes his captors as "a bunch of friendly teenagers with Kalashnikovs," says he spent much of his time in captivity keeping a diary, listening to Radio Netherlands' world broadcasts, and designing a house.

Although his captors initially demanded \$1 million, they released him after Colombian fieldworkers convinced them that Jonker was neither rich nor associated with a foreign company.



Jonker and friends.