

Genesis 9:7–27 — I Do Set My Bow in the Cloud

The Noahic Covenant, Covenants of Promise, Every Covenant for the Earth, Everlasting and Its Scope, Ham's Sin, and the Prophecy of the Three Sons

Scripture Reading: Genesis 9:7–27; Revelation 4:3; Ezekiel 1:28

“I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth... and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

“As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.” (Ezekiel 1:28)

The Covenant Established: Not a Contract, an Imposition

God spake unto Noah and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant. The character of a covenant in Scripture is not that of a mutually negotiated contract in which two parties sit together and hammer out terms. God acts sovereignly and states his arrangement. He did not consult Noah; he did not ask for Noah's input or agreement. This was the case with Adam's covenant (Hosea 6:7), and it is the case here. The covenant is God's unilateral declaration of how he will deal with man and creation in the new order. Scholarship on ancient near-eastern suzerainty treaties — where a powerful king imposes terms on a subject people — has gotten somewhat closer to the biblical concept, but the biblical covenant is God acting sovereignly from his own nature and purposes, not a king imitating a treaty form.

What This Covenant Is and Is Not: Distinguishing the Noahic from the Covenants of Promise

Ephesians 2:12 says Gentiles were strangers from the covenants of promise. But every nation has seen rainbows; no one has been a stranger to the sign of this covenant. The Noahic covenant is therefore not among the covenants of promise. The covenants of promise — the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant — are gracious and unconditional covenants involving a positive bestowal, a giving of something: land, seed, throne, forgiveness, the law written in the heart. The Noahic covenant is a negative promise: I will not destroy the earth again by flood. It is a restraint on judgment, not a gift of blessing. It is also universal, not confined to Israel. Every covenant of promise is for Israel specifically; this one is for the whole earth and for every living creature.

The Mosaic covenant is also excluded from the covenants of promise, because the law conditioned blessing on man's performance and is therefore not in the same category as the unconditional promises. The covenants of promise are all one-sided acts of God, entirely dependent on his sovereign faithfulness. The Mosaic covenant alone brought in a conditional element, and the people who said all that the Lord has said we will do sealed their own failure by taking on that obligation — the flesh always says it can do things because it does not know itself.

Every Covenant Is for the Earth

An important and often-missed principle: every covenant in Scripture is for the earth. The gracious covenants with Israel are for the earthly people and the earthly land. The Noahic covenant is for the earth and its preservation. Even the New Covenant, which has the law written in the heart and full knowledge of God, is for Israel in the earth in the millennium. The church is not under any covenant. Many Christians are taught from the pews that we are under the new

covenant, but the new covenant is for the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31). Christians enjoy spiritual blessings that far exceed what the new covenant provides for Israel, but these are not covenant blessings — they are the blessings of being in Christ, of the mystery hidden before the ages, of the heavenly calling.

Everlasting: Its Scope and Its Terminus

Verse 16 calls this an everlasting covenant. But the present heavens and earth will be dissolved by fire (2 Peter 3:10–12); they will pass away. How then is the covenant everlasting? The word everlasting in these passages does not mean what eternal means when applied to God himself. It means as long as the present order of things lasts. It is co-extensive with the present heavens and earth, and when those pass away, the covenant has fulfilled its purpose. Psalm 72:7 speaks of Christ's reign — so long as the moon endureth. The moon will eventually not endure; the reign it describes has a scope bounded by the present order. Everlasting covenants with Israel regarding the land, the throne of David, the priesthood of Phinehas — these are everlasting in the same sense: they apply to and reach through the entire span of the present order of things, including the millennium. But in the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness dwells, there is no Davidic reign, no Israel-and-Gentile distinction, no need of a token against a flood — all things are new.

This caution against over-literalizing everlasting is not a retreat from biblical faithfulness but a safeguard against running off with one text and missing what God has said in many others. No prophecy is to be understood from its own particular interpretation alone — the whole of what God has said must be taken in together. When that is done, a balance appears: God's promises are utterly reliable within their proper scope, and that scope is stated with more precision than is often appreciated.

The Rainbow: A Token Reflecting the Glory of God

I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. The token is not arbitrary. Ezekiel 1:28 describes the vision of the glory of Jehovah and says: as the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about — this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. The rainbow is used in the vision of God's glory to represent that glory. What God chose as the token of his covenant is the same element used in Scripture to describe the brightness of his own glory.

In Revelation 4:3, the rainbow appears round about the throne, like an emerald. In Revelation 10:1, the mighty angel has a rainbow upon his head. The token given to Noah in Genesis 9 appears again in the visions of the throne throughout Scripture. God did not forget the covenant he made with Noah. The rainbow is not merely a meteorological phenomenon but a sign of the faithfulness of God — two things are required to make it: water droplets in the air, and light. God is light. His light shining through the medium of the water that was used in judgment becomes a sign of his mercy and preservation.

Ham, Shem, and Japheth: The Prophecy of Noah

The birth order of Noah's sons is established from the text: Japheth was the eldest (Genesis 10:21), Shem was the middle son (chapter 11:10 shows he was 98 when the flood came, two years younger than the 100-year-old Japheth), and Ham was the youngest (chapter 9:24: Noah knew what his younger son had done). Ham saw his father's nakedness in his tent when Noah was drunk from the wine of his vineyard, and told his brothers without. Shem and Japheth took a garment and went backward to cover their father, their faces turned away.

Noah's prophetic words assign consequences to each line. Cursed be Canaan, Ham's son — a servant of servants to his brothers. Blessed be the LORD God of

Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. The line of Shem carries the blessing — the messianic line, from which the Lord Jesus comes. Ham's failure and its consequence on his son Canaan point to what becomes the Canaanite nations, whose land Israel eventually inherits. Japheth's enlarging is fulfilled in the broad spread of the Indo-European peoples, and his dwelling in the tents of Shem looks forward to the Gentile blessing that comes through Israel.

The recurring pattern in Genesis holds again here: the blessing does not go through the firstborn. Japheth was eldest; the blessing goes through Shem. Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; Joseph, not Reuben; Ephraim, not Manasseh. God's sovereign choice runs through these narratives as a consistent thread. The firstborn has his place and his rights, which Scripture always honors; but the line of blessing is God's own appointment, not nature's order.

I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth.