

The covenant of the rainbow: the ultimate sign of hope



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For many stories, the meaning changes drastically when read through different lenses. Looking at the context in which Thucydides writes might lead one to see it as a warning to the Athenians not to repeat the mistakes of the past, while looking at the text as a separate entity reveals a depressing commentary on the predictability of human nature. But the covenant of the rainbow in Genesis 9 seems less fickle in interpretation. On every level of analysis, from the word choice to speculations about the author's motives, one can see the same underlying message. Perhaps it is because of the universal assurance this message provides. For the rainbow is the ultimate sign of hope in forgiveness, one that existed long before organized religion. The rainbow, and the covenant it represents, can give hope to many generations that God's wrath will eventually subside, no matter how severe the crime.

When comparing translations of the Bible, there are remarkably few major variations in translation. Because of this, it is ironic that the biggest discrepancy comes from the most famous word in this passage: rainbow. While translations such as the New International Version and the New Living Translation use the word "rainbow", the King James Bible, the American Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version all use the word "bow."^{[1][2][3][4][5]} The word in Hebrew, *qeshet*, usually refers to a hunting bow^[6]. The word also shows up figuratively in several other places in the Bible. In books such as the Psalms, Hosea, and Jeremiah, it is used to represent "the judgment of God"^[7]. In the flood, God's judgment had come down on the people in the form of rain (thence, the rainbow). But the bow is nothing to fear, since it is "now 'put away,' hung in place by the clouds,

suggesting that the “ battle,” the storm, is over.”[8] God’s weapon is no longer pointed at humanity. Instead, it is facing away. While his wrath was severe, it is finished. Now is the time for mercy. At the simplest level, the words of Genesis 9 provide hope that God does relent from punishing his people. In the Bible, the story of the rainbow seems to be a simple etiological legend.

Genesis chapter 9 provides a very easy explanation for why rainbows exist. But the covenant it represents is much more meaningful when taken in context. The covenant in chapter 9 is the first one mentioned in the Bible. It seems odd then, that in the New Living Translation, God says that he is “ confirming” his covenant with Noah (most other translations use the word establish).² The Hebrew word, “ kum,” can be translated either way[9]. But how could God confirm something that did not exist yet? The answer lies in Genesis 1, with God’s initial command to Adam and Eve: “ Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth” (Gen 1: 28).² This command is then repeated in Genesis 9: 1 to Noah and his sons. Despite the evil that had been committed before the flood, “ The old Adamic Covenant would be established (heqîm) with Noah, and all that the Lord had entrusted to and required of Adam would devolve on Noah and his descendants.”[10] This is the same God who had just destroyed almost all of creation! But now his anger seems to have dissipated. He lets humans start over again from before the fall, before the wickedness of humankind doomed it to almost complete destruction. God gave all of creation back to humanity. He recanted from his anger, and even “ blessed” Noah and his sons.⁵ The hope provided here is not just hope for a partial absolution, but for complete pardon. This story not only establishes

the rainbow, but also the idea of total forgiveness to start over, whatever the scale. It is the message of God's mercy that would have been a powerful source of strength to the original Jews reading it.

This section of Genesis is often attributed to the P source, which is believed to have been written after the monarchy fell in 586 BCE[11]. During this time, many ancient stories were written down or copied by former royal scribes in order to give hope to the Jews living in exile in Babylon¹¹. This story probably resonated with its early Jewish readers because they felt that their exile was punishment for their sins. The prophet Jeremiah writes that they are conquered "because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel," such as committing adultery and blasphemy (Jer 29: 23 NRSV)⁵. Surely many must have wondered if God would ever restore the people of Israel. Since the royal scribes also transcribed down Genesis 1, they could use the same language to remind the people of the new beginning after the flood. Their desire to provide hope followed the story of the flood as it has spanned the ages, from when it was written, even to the present.

No matter what the problems facing a generation, everyone is always looking for a reason to hope for a better day. Perhaps that is why the message of forgiveness in Genesis 9 is so prevalent, no matter how one looks at it. From the smallest word choice to the entire context in which it was written, its purpose does not change or diminish. It remains the first promise, made to all of humanity, that God's wrath is not eternal. It is a story not only for an ancient Jewish nation, but also the rest of humanity, both past and present. It is for this reason that it has endured the test of time and is still studied from so many different perspectives today.

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