

**Genesis 9**  
**February 14, 2021**

1) Genesis 9:1-7 – Rules for the New Order of Creation

- a) In verses 1-3 the Priestly writer repeats God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply,” as previously stated in 8:15-19 and 1:28. Even in the face of the ethical collapse of God’s creation, God urges the remaining humans to grow and to flourish. As Von Rad states, “God, in spite of everything, has renewed this command for this generation too.... God still wills procreation and increase of humanity.” There is also the repeated command to have dominion over the created order, only this time it explicitly states the use of animals for food. As suggested by Sibley Towner, “Reproductive energy will now be enhanced by lamb chops and chicken giblets.” The Priestly writers with their animal sacrifices on the temple altar do not envision a vegetarian God or a meatless diet for humanity.
  
- b) Verses 4-7 provide regulations for Noah’s sovereign dominion over creation. 1<sup>st</sup>, in verse 4, we are prohibited from eating the blood of animals. Before partaking in the eating of meat the carcass must be drained of its blood. 2<sup>nd</sup>, in verses 5 and 6 the Priestly writers issue a prohibition against the murder of humans. Clear rules of retaliation are stated: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed.” The retaliation is limited to the murderer. This ban is established on the grounds that persons are made in the image of God and therefore have a special status in God’s creation. The Priestly writer has a vision of an obedient and orderly world where God wills to assure a healthy and viable humankind. It is important to note that these regulations apply to all of humanity and not just to Noah’s family and to Israel. They are meant for all people.

2) Genesis 9:8-17 – A New Covenant

- a) God establishes a covenant with Noah, his descendants, “and every living creature that is with you.” Unlike other Old Testament covenants, there is no personal action or ritual performed by Noah. Here the pledge is made by God alone. God promises to never again destroy all life with a flood and God places the rainbow in the sky as a sign that this covenant will last

forever. The rainbow is the climax of the story of Noah and the flood. As the flood covered all creation so the rainbow is visible to all creation. Walter Brueggemann commented: "...chaos is not the last word. The last word is retained by the one who stands outside of and presides over the flood. And his last word is 'I will remember my covenant'."

- b) The rainbow signifies God's commitment to creation in at least 2 ways.
  - i) The rainbow of many colors signifying God's repudiation of global catastrophe replaces a militaristic image of the divine realm protected by warriors ready for battle and armed with powerful bows. The rainbow is a symbol of peace. The Hebrew word that we translate as "rainbow" elsewhere in the Old Testament refers to "the bow of war." Von Rad concludes, "The beauty of the ancient conception thus becomes apparent: God shows the world that he has put aside his bow."
  - ii) The rainbow covenant signifies a divine promise to all life on earth as stated by Sibley Towner: "God enters into an everlasting covenant with alligators as well as human beings and guarantees their place within the providential order."

### 3) Genesis 9:18-29 – The Sons of Noah

- a) This text, filled with obscurities and difficulties, shows humankind at its worst with stories of drunkenness, sexual perversion, and enslavement. Like the story of Cain and Abel we saw earlier in Genesis, and like stories that are to follow in the Hebrew Bible about Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and David and Bathsheba, biblical characters can be terribly flawed and driven by base motives. As soon as the earth dried out, Noah and his sons are involved in a crass web of sordid stories.
- b) Verses 18 and 19 provide the link between Noah and the human family that descends from him. There are 3 sons of Noah: Shem, Ham (the father of Canaan), and Japheth. The writer does a great deal more than to give their names; he provides an explanation (or a justification) for the identity of each of the human communities formed by the descendants of these 3 sons. There are inconsistencies in the story caused by an editor inserting Ham in verses

18 and 22 to bring chapter 9 in harmony with chapter 10. Another difficulty arises when comparing this account with the story of the flood. In the earlier story the sons of Noah are married. In chapter 9, on the other hand, they are unmarried and living in a tent with their father.

- c) In verse 20 Noah is described as a “man of the soil,” as he plants a vineyard and restores the proud profession of farming. According to the Old Testament the cultivation of the grape is the most noble of agricultural tasks. Von Rad notes in his commentary, “To possess a vineyard, to enjoy its noble fruit and to rest in the peace of its shade, was for the Israelite bliss and messianic longing.”
- d) Noah makes wine and gets drunk. In his drunken stupor he lies naked in his tent. The uncovering of genitals was taboo in the Israelite religion from the earliest times as stated in Leviticus 18 and 20. Ham, the father of Canaan, sees “the nakedness of his father.” It is possible to interpret this as simply an unavoidable accident where Ham just happens to see his father in a compromised situation. Verse 24 seems to hint at a more serious event. Von Rad suggests, “Possibly the narrator suppressed something even more repulsive than mere looking.” Most interpreters see something more insidious in this episode where Ham engaged in an incestuous homosexual act or, as suggested by Walter Brueggemann, he took advantage of his father’s drunkenness and had a sexual encounter with his mother. If Ham represents Canaanite society they were castigated by the Israelites for their cults of sacred prostitution and orgiastic worship (see Hosea 4:12-14). The writer of this text is reading back into these ancestral stories the tribal prejudices and attitudes of his own day. Brueggemann wrote: “This narrative is an opportunity to root in prehistory the power relations between Israel and Canaan and to justify it on theological grounds.”
- e) Verses 25-29 describe the blessing and the curse pronounced by Noah because of these events. At the end of the story Shem is rewarded and comes out as the privilege character with Japheth as 2<sup>nd</sup> in line becoming a guest or resident alien within Shem’s community. Ham/Canaan is condemned to the role of being a slave to his 2 brothers. By virtue of this one story all the peoples of the world were given a permanent status in relation to the others. Shem represents the Hebrew people. Japheth is probably a designation for

the Philistines who shared the promised land with the Hebrew people. Ham is clearly a designation for the despised Canaanites. In truth, as stated by Sibley Towner, “This text reflects the rivalry between ethnic communities in Israel of the early monarchical period.” That is, it reflects the social order at the time this passage was written.

- f) As many of us growing up in the South may attest, Noah’s curse of Ham is the source of a multitude of tragic problems. It was used as a justification for enslaving Africans and for supporting segregation. Ethnic hatreds have been given divine approval by misusing this Scripture. Towner goes on to state an important warning for our day: “This text has the potential to lead to bigotry and prejudice... Let it do so no more. Let there be no judgment among the peoples that by primeval decree one group is inferior to another.... God moves us toward the day when all peoples of the earth will acknowledge that they are the children of one creator and that they belong to one worldwide human community that can live in shalom.”

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. With the rainbow covenant God promised to never again destroy all life with a flood. Later in Scripture we read of apocalyptic fears of a violent and destructive end to human life. The whole world now lives under the threat of nuclear annihilation. The entire global community is now facing an existential crisis of a spike in carbon dioxide that will doom our planet if not reversed. Does God’s promise to the descendants of Noah have anything to do with these much-feared doomsday scenarios?
2. In the story of the flood God is pictured as the source of both the flood and the rainbow, both the bad and the good. Is this true? Is God the source of natural disasters and are evil events in nature correctly seen as divine punishment for human sin?
3. In your past, have you heard of cruel and racist references to the curse of Ham? Are these racist comments a genuine part of our Scripture? Are they an example of progressive revelation or progressive understanding?

4. In Virginia the issue of capital punishment is before our state legislature. Would you apply Genesis 9:4-7 to this current ethical debate? Why or why not?