

# God’s Covenant with Noah

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## I. INTRODUCTION

After the Flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and his sons. A covenant is an agreement between parties that creates a family relationship among them.

**Read: Genesis 9:8-17**

*[8] Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,*

*[9] "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you,*

*[10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.*

*[11] I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."*

*[12] And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:*

*[13] I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.*

*[14] When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,*

*[15] I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.*

*[16] When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."*

*[17] God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth."*

What promise is God making to mankind in this covenant? What do you think is the significance of a promise like this (that is, what does God seem to want to communicate to mankind about Himself)?

### *A. The Rainbow – Sign of the Covenant*

Pleased by Noah’s sacrifice, God promises never to blot out all life or to disturb the order on the earth by a flood again.

Now he renews that promise in the context of a covenant that covers all creation and which is ratified by a sign – the rainbow. The Fathers of the Church saw this rainbow as the first proclamation of this new covenant.

Through the rainbow, God shows that He wants to be connected to His creation - all of it - in such a way as to create confidence in Him and peace among His creatures.

He wants to be trusted as the loving Father that He is. The severe judgment on the earth in the Flood appears to have served God's purposes and will never happen again. Man will not have to live in perpetual fear of a repetition of this kind of calamity again.

God magnificently communicates Himself through His creation. Not everything that can be known about Him is apparent in what He has made; nevertheless, nature teaches us much about God.

*"God speaks to man through the visible creation. The material cosmos is so presented to man's intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator. Light and darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both His greatness and his nearness" (CCC 1147).*

God chooses to reveal Himself in order for man to truly know Him. By using the rainbow and by making a statement about what He promises to do, He gives man both kinds of knowledge, natural and supernatural. Man, who is body and soul, is perfectly suited to this kind of communication with God.

### *B. A Series of Covenants*

The covenant with Noah marks the start of a series of covenants God will freely establish with men. [Actually the first covenant was with Adam and Eve – husband and wife – and creation]. Through each covenant God deepens his relationship with his estranged creatures. Each covenant becomes more focused and at the same time enlarges God’s family – from Adam and Eve [two people] to Noah [a household – eight people], etc.

## II. NOAH’S SONS

From the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, new peoples and nations will arise as described in the next chapter. However, man continues to be inclined towards evil, which flourishes anew. We see Noah’s abuse of wine and discord in family relationships.

Despite the fact that Noah gets off to a good start by offering a pleasing sacrifice to God, his clean slate doesn’t last very long.

**Read: Genesis 9:18-28**

*[18] The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan.*

*[19] These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled.*

*[20] Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard;*

*[21] and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent.*

*[22] And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.*

*[23] Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.*

*[24] When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him,*

*[25] he said, "Cursed be Canaan;  
a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers."*

*[26] He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave."*

*[27] God enlarge Japheth,  
and let him dwell in the tents of Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave."*

*[28] After the flood Noah lived three hundred and fifty years.*

*[29] All the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.*

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### *C. Noah Abuses Wine*

Noah begins to till the soil and farm the land and he plants a vineyard. God has given wine to gladden the heart [Song of Songs 1:2-4], but Noah has the unhappy misfortune of being the first recorded drunk in the Bible.

### *D. Ham Dishonours His Father*

*And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father. . . When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan;*

This is a very difficult passage to understand. Noah’s youngest son, Ham, sees his father’s nakedness in his drunken state and summons his brothers. The older brothers, Shem and Japheth, respectfully back into the tent to cover their father’s nakedness. When Noah sobers up and learns of the situation, he curses Ham’s son, Canaan. Why?

### *E. Ham’s Offense*

It is difficult to know precisely the nature of Ham's offense against his father.

As various scholars have noticed, the key is found in the idiomatic meaning of the Hebrew phrase “to look upon his nakedness” since it refers elsewhere to incest [Read: Lev. 18:8-16; and 20:17]. This is quite possibly a reference to incest on the part of Ham.

In Lev. 18:16, the nakedness of a brother's wife is called the brother's nakedness; the nakedness of Noah could be a reference to his wife's nakedness! In addition, when Noah awakes from sleep and realizes what has happened, he curses Canaan, not Ham. Canaan could be the son of that incestuous episode, which explains why the son and not the father is cursed?

Sexual lust or perversity, as demonstrated by Ham provides a background for the condemnation of Canaanite sexual practices.

God formulates very specific laws governing sexual behaviour in Leviticus 18 to preserve the dignity and sanctity of human sexuality according to His perfect plan.

### *F. A Curse on Canaan; a Blessing on Shem*

*[26] He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."*

A better translation of vs. 26 is "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem."

This is the first time in the Bible that God is identified with the name of a man. Shem is set in a position of superiority over his brothers. Although little information is given about him, we can assume that Noah sets Shem above the son of Ham, Canaan.

In fact, the sons of Ham are destined to serve the sons of Shem. Noah says that God will "dwell in the tents of Shem," suggesting a close and blessed relationship between the Shem-ites (whom we call now "Semites") and God. This blessing and curse helps us understand the later troubled relationship between the Israelites (Semites – descendants of Shem) and the Canaanites [cursed in their ancestor Ham or Canaan].

## The Origin of Peoples

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Chapter 10: 1-32 gives the genealogy of the nations descended from Noah. In this way the Bible once more teaches that the whole human race is of the same stock. Scholars call this genealogy the Table of Nations because it tells which nations came from each of Noah’s sons.

The sons of Noah multiply and populate the earth. Shem and his sons father the Israelites, God’s chosen people. Shem’s family would be the foundation of the People of God.

The word “shem” means “name” in Hebrew.

### *G. The descendants of Ham*

*[6] The sons of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan.*

*[7] The sons of Cush: Seba, Hav'ilah, Sabtah, Ra'amah, and Sab'teca. The sons of Ra'amah: Sheba and Dedan.*

*[8] Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man.*

*[9] He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD."*

*[10] The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar.*

# The Tower of Babel

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## I. INTRODUCTION

After the genealogies comes one of the most famous stories in Genesis – the story of the Tower of Babel. Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, built the city of Babel, in the land of Shinar (Gen. 10:9-10).

The term “Babel” is the original Semitic name for the city which we know by its Greek form as “Babylon.” “Bab” means gate and “El” means God, so in the Hebrew language, “Babel” means “gate of God.”

The city of Babylon flourished during the 18<sup>th</sup> century BC, more or less around the time of Abraham.

### **Read: Genesis 11:1-9**

*[1] Now the whole earth had one language and few words.*

*[2] And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.*

*[3] And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.*

*[4] Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."*

*[5] And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built.*

*[6] And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.*

*[7] Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."*

*[8] So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.*

*[9] Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused*

*the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

## II. THE ARROGANCE OF THE CHILDREN OF HAM

The descendants of Ham who settled in the Plain of Shinar [ancient Mesopotamia, which is modern Iraq] decided to make a name for themselves. They said,

*"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."*

These descendants of Ham reached a high degree of technical proficiency. This seems to have concentrated a great deal of power and pride among them. Their desire to build a tower to heaven speaks of an arrogance and autonomy that can be dangerous.

- We saw this kind of prideful independence in Adam, Cain, and Lamech.

The tower-builders think they can reach heaven by themselves, without following God’s way.

The tower represents a physical manifestation of the pride of man, which, in its infancy, leads to disobedience to God; and when full-grown, can lead to a direct assault on God Himself, with the desire to be rid of Him for good.

- The tower comes provocatively close to that.

In their desire to make a name for themselves these descendants of Ham could be consciously rebelling against the Shem-ites [Semites], descendants of the one upon whom the blessing of God, through Noah, rested.

This would be a play on the word "Shem" [Note: The name "Shem" in Hebrew means "name"]. It suggests insubordination and a grasping at a blessing not really theirs.

## III. ONE LANGUAGE; MANY LANGUAGES

*[1] Now the whole earth had one language and few words.*

The Tower of Babel narrative describes the transition from mutual understanding to mutual incomprehension on the part of the human race. Originally, Genesis tells us that there was only one language with few words. The pride and over-

reaching of the tower project leads to the collapse of interpersonal communication. God confuses their language, which was only one at the time of the building of the tower.

Whether they wanted to or not, the Lord scattered men over the face of the earth, separating them by languages and making unity difficult.

The diversity in human languages represents the pride and arrogance of man, who abused his original unity with others to work against God instead of for Him.

#### *A. Pentecost*

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles to begin the work of creating the Church, it is of no small significance that there was a miracle that undid the effects of Babel.

It was a thrilling sign that what God was about to do in men would now enable them to use their unity in the right way-to live as God's family on earth.

## **IV. THE DESCENDANTS OF SHEM – THE SEMITES**

This new list of Shem’s descendants introduces the narrative of God’s calling of Abraham. It sets the origin of the people of Israel, descended from Abraham, in the context of world history.

### **Read: Genesis 11:10-26**

*[10] These are the descendants of Shem . . .*

*[24] When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he became the father of Terah;*

*[25] and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah a hundred and nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters.*

*[26] When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.*

These verses give the genealogy of Shem, Noah's righteous firstborn son.

Shem lived a very long time, long enough to be alive when Abram was born. That would have made Shem the great patriarch of Noah's family and the one on whom the blessing of God rested.

### A. The Family of Terah

**Read: Genesis 11:27-31**

*[27] Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.*

*[28] Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chalde'ans.*

*[29] And Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.*

*[30] Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.*

*[31] Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.*

The other branches of Seth’s line have been left to one side, and attention is now focussed on the family of Terah, from which will come Abraham, the central character of the narrative.

Here the text gives the names of the ancestors of Israel, Abraham and Sarah, the family to which they belonged, their place of origin, and the circumstances that led to their settling in Canaan.

All will become part of the history and faith of Israel as we read in Joshua 24:2-4:

*[2] And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, `Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.*

*[3] Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac;*

*[4] and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.*

Terah, and his sons, Abram and Nahor lived in Ur, a large city of Mesopotamia.

# The Story of Abraham

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## I. ABRAHAM'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

The Lord speaks to Abram (who lived about 2000 B.C.), about whom we know very little, except that he is a Shemite, a member of the family destined to have a covenant relationship with God (because of Noah's blessing in Gen. 9:26-27).

### **Read: Genesis 12:1-3**

*[1] Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*

*[2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.*

*[3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."*

### **A. A Clean Break with the Past**

What is the first thing God requires of Abraham? What is the significance of that requirement?

God tells Abram to leave everything and go to a place unknown to him. He has to make a clean break with what is familiar and dear to him. Inevitably, this will mean a break with the customs and religious practices of his father's house.

- Abram perhaps doesn't realize it, but he is on the threshold of a magnificent and enduring revelation of the One, True God.

Everything that came before must now be released. It is a dramatic call to a turning away from one way of life to embrace something very new. It is the very first glimpse we have in Scripture of what conversion looks like.

### **B. God Blesses Abraham**

In just three verses, the word "bless" (or some form of it) appears five times. Think back to Eden (Gen. 1:28) and back to Noah as he got off the Ark (Gen. 9:1). What does this profusion of references to blessing suggest to us about what God is set to do?

We know that God's original blessing on man consisted in the fact that man was pleasing in God's sight. When He looked upon all that He had created, He saw that it was "very good."

That blessing was later replaced by a curse, as man fell from grace and from favour in God's eyes.

Noah and his family also received God's blessing on the first day of life on the renewed earth. Noah passed on the blessing to Shem, but Ham, his dishonourable son, incurred a curse.

Here in these verses there is such an explosion of blessing that we can only draw one conclusion: whatever it is that God is about to begin with Abram must be His plan to counter any sabotage of His deep and abiding intention to bless His creatures by once again making them pleasing in His sight.

- The blessing on Abram will be so far reaching that generations yet unborn will experience it. It is a promise that looks forward, but it also looks backward.

Remember that when Adam and Eve left Eden, they took two problems with them.

- The first was the presence of an enemy who hated them. God promised to send "the woman and her seed" to address that problem.
- The other was the change that had taken place inside of them, a change so radical they had to be expelled from Eden.

### *C. The Curse Reversed*

How would this problem ever be reversed? The answer lies here in God's promise to Abram. It will take centuries for all the details to get worked out, but there is no missing the fact that God wants to restore humanity to its original blessedness.

He has a plan to do it that involves a nation with a unique relationship with Him. Somehow this nation will provide an open door for all men everywhere to be blessed. Is that the door back to the Garden? Yes.

As we saw previously, Jesus was "The Seed" of the woman in Gen. 3:15. It was Jesus, a descendant of Abram through the royal line of King David, Who became the door of blessing for all men.

He was the perfect, righteous, firstborn Son of God, Who made a way for men to be free of the tyranny of sin and to be pleasing in God's sight. This promise to

Abram is not just about a new place for him to live. It is a promise that will regain Paradise, for him and all who come after him.

## **II. GOD’S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM**

The promise that God makes to Abram has three parts.

- First, God will make Abram the father of a great nation. That nation was the nation of Israel, which did not exist before Abram.
- Second, God will make his "name great," which, in that day, meant not that he would be famous but that he would father a dynasty of kings.
- Third, God promises that all families on the earth will be able to bless themselves through Abram.

This means that through Abram's descendants, God will open a door of blessing for men, reversing the curse pronounced in Eden. During the course of Abram's life, all these promises will be transformed by God into covenants, which we will see in Genesis 15, 17, and 22.

Abram's descendants became a "great nation" (and not just a collection of tribes) at about 1500 B.C., when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and back to their homeland, Canaan. God established a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, giving them a liturgical and civil code to live by. This distinguished them from all other nations on earth. They agreed to be His people by keeping that covenant.

Abram's name became "great" in about 1000 B.C., when God made David king over Israel. This was a wonderful time in the history of Israel, when their enemies had been defeated, the land had been secured, and David sat on the royal throne in Jerusalem.

- God made a solemn promise to him that one of his descendants would always sit on that throne. In other words, David began a royal line of kings.

"All families" could bless themselves through Abram when, in about 4 B.C., Jesus, who was a Son of David and thus of Abram, was born. Jesus came to make universal blessing once again possible for humanity. Jesus established His Church before He left, which would perpetually offer blessing to the world, until His return.

## Summary

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## Questions

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## Preparation

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