

N is for Noah

Even today, when the Bible is so rarely opened in homes and schools, most children know the story of 'Mr Noah and his ark'. But is it just that – a nice story to tell our children?

Did Noah exist?

If Genesis 5 gives a complete genealogy, Noah was the last of ten antediluvian patriarchs and was born 1,056 years after the creation of Adam; his name, a play on words, means 'comfort' or 'relief' (verse 29). Noah's life, particularly relating to the Flood, is recorded in Genesis 6–9. The narrative is convincing:

- because of the chronological detail given in the genealogy (Gen 5) and in the account of the Flood (Gen 7:11; 8:4–5, 13–14);
- because Noah's name appears, with those of his ancestors, in an important genealogy of Joseph/Jesus (Luke 3:36–38);
- because Noah is referred to as an historical character by Jesus Himself (Luke 17:26,27);
- because Noah is as much an example of faith as such undeniably historical men as Abraham and Moses (Hebrews 11:7);
- because the life story of Noah is used by the apostle Peter to illustrate vital Biblical truth (1 Peter 3:18–22; 2 Peter 2:4–10).

What about the long lives?

The median life-span of the patriarchs listed in Genesis 5 is more than 900 years, a figure which many people find incredible. But:

- the Scriptures clearly intend the great ages, though surprising, to be taken literally;
- attempts to modify the numbers, often by suggesting that each antediluvian year is some multiple of a 'modern' year, raise rather more questions than they answer;
- Mesopotamian traditions reflect a memory of remarkable longevity in antiquity;
- the period before the Flood was unique. After it, human life-spans reduced in length (Psalm 90:10), with some clear exceptions (e.g. Genesis 50:26; Deuteronomy 34:7).

covenant mercy

A storm blows past, the sun comes out and, in front of a lowering sky beneath which distant rain falls, an arc traces out a glorious spectrum. We have seen such an awesome display often before, yet always love to see it again: the beauty and wonder of a rainbow never pall. As Wordsworth wrote,

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!*

The mystery of the formation of a rainbow – the splitting of white light by refraction and internal reflection in raindrops – was finally solved in the early 1300s. In recent years, a rainbow has been used on flags by the peace movement, the gay rights movement and post-apartheid South Africa, the 'rainbow nation'. Today, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, rainbow drawings are appearing world-wide to send out a message of hope. But any such message should be set firmly in its historical and theological context.



No doubt the rainbow was a meteorological phenomenon before mankind was created. But it took on a special meaning after the Flood, when God declared the rainbow to be the sign of a special covenant that He had made for all time with every living creature: read now **Genesis 9:8–17**.

The clear message of this passage of Scripture is not the wishful thought that "somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue". It is the comforting revelation that, whenever a rainbow appears, God will remember the covenant that He made – in other words, He will bring to mind and honour His binding commitment never again to destroy the earth by flood. When we see a rainbow, we too should be reminded of that wonderful covenant. But what do we know about it?

It is a **divine covenant** because every aspect of it – its initiation, its promulgation, its implementation – is entirely the work of God. He established it (9,11, 17) and made it (12); it is His covenant (15) and no more the work of man, or dependent upon man, than the rainbow which is its sign. In fact, “All God’s covenants with man are of His own making” (Matthew Henry). How grateful we should be that the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) is a God who makes and keeps covenants with us.

It is a **universal covenant** which embraces every living creature: Noah, his family, all the animals that were with them in the ark, and all of their respective descendants (9–10, 12, 15–17). No-one today, or in the ages to come, is excluded from its provision. The rainbow, seen by all who look in the right direction, is the sign of a covenant that applies to all.

It is an **everlasting covenant** (16): it applied at the time of Noah but would then obtain “for all future generations” (12). God promised that “never again” (11a, 11b, 15b) would there be such a flood as the one that Noah and his family experienced. The covenant will be actively in place as long as the rainbow is recurrently in sight.

It is a **merciful covenant**. The Flood was God’s judgement on the utter corruption and wickedness of the world (Genesis 6:5–7, 11–13). Yet after it, and though He knew that mankind would again turn its back on Him, God promised that “never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (11) What mercy! “It is owing to God’s goodness and faithfulness, not to any reformation of the world, that it has not often been deluged, and that it is not deluged now.” (Matthew Henry) In the depths of our need, when we are most conscious of our sin, we can approach God with confidence in the certain knowledge of His abundant mercy (Psalm 51:1ff; Daniel 9:16–18). How can we be so sure of this? The hymn-writer puts it well: “our rainbow arch Thy mercy’s sign”.

It is a **remembered covenant**. Just as “God remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1), so He will remember the covenant He made with Noah (15,16). The language is clearly anthropomorphic, for God has no need of reminders and will never forget the covenants He has made (Deuteronomy 4:31). But how encouraging it is to think, every time we see a rainbow, that God is still on the throne and continues to keep His word and fulfil His promises. Praise be to Him!



- Science has revealed some of the *method* (how the rainbow is formed, even though light remains very mysterious), but only Scripture can reveal the *message* that it conveys. Here, as ever, honest science and true religion complement each other.
- *The rainbow is the reflection of the beams of the sun, which intimates that all the glory and significancy of the seals of the covenant are derived from Christ the Sun of righteousness, who is also described with a rainbow about his throne (Rev 4:3) and a rainbow upon his head (Rev 10:1)*
Matthew Henry, 1706
- God spoke to Noah before he faced the uncharted waters of the Flood. Later, as Noah faced a very different world to the one he had known before, God spoke to him again and gave him a great promise. We too are living in unfamiliar, unsettling times; we too should look to God for His encouragement and guidance.
- *Now, as then, when any great convulsions shake what seems permanent, and bring home to men the thinness of the crust of use and wont [habit] roofing an infinite depth of unknown possibilities of change, on which we walk, the heart cries out for some assurance of perpetuity, and some revelation of God’s mind. We can have such, as truly as Noah had, if we use the revelation given us in Jesus.*

Alexander Maclaren, 1904