

Genesis 9:1-17

Lesson 5

With the destruction of the old world there is now a need for the populating of the earth to begin anew, hopefully this time remedying the ills that caused the flood to be necessary. It is important for humanity to build upon a more secure moral foundation. New norms of human behavior are necessary. While there is hope of a new better world there is also the specter of the reason for the necessity of the flood looming in the background. The epilogue to the flood narrative addresses these considerations. This next section divides into two complementary parts that are logically interconnected. The first part, verse 1-7, deals with the renewal of the world. The second part, verses 8-17, is a section of divine assurances. Key phrases frame each section: “Be fruitful and multiply” (1-7); and “I establish a covenant” (9-17).¹

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 60.

**9¹ And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them,
“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.**

After departing from the ark God blesses these people who are going to repopulate this newly reformed world. In many ways this newly reformed earth is a new beginning and many of the initial injunctions by God are going to be reissued to this small band of people. It is noteworthy that the blessing that is given here is both to Noah and his sons and not simply to Noah as patriarch. Perhaps this is meant to indicate a level of responsibility that God desires from each of these men who are going to become the beginning point of many nations.

The initial injunction given by God to Adam and Eve at 1:28 is repeated here, thus taking us not only back to a new starting point but also serving as a clear reminder that God intends for his purposes for humanity to continue and the failure of humanity to succeed in being what God intended has not changed the desired outcome of God.

2 The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the

heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered.

The power of man over the animal kingdom is confirmed and the authority that they have over the animals is perhaps even enhanced. The phrase “**Into your hand they are delivered**” perhaps indicates this enhancement.²

Wenham describes the language that is used here as military language indicating animosity between mankind and the animal kingdom. Likely resulting from sin of mankind in chapter 3. The language implies that mankind now has the power of life and death over animals (Deuteronomy 19:12; 20:13 etc.).³

3 Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

Here a major change takes place for humanity as the animals are given as a food source for mankind as the plants had been earlier (1:2). It is of interest that the distinction between clean and unclean animals is not highlighted at this

² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 60.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 192.

point.⁴ Not even *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, or *Onqelos* comment on this lack of specification here. This would seem to indicate that all animals were permissible for Noah and his sons to eat not simply those that will later be declared clean..

4 But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

For us perhaps, the next prohibition might seem unnecessary, but it is forbidden to eat an animal that is still living (I am reminded of people swallowing goldfish as an example of this), it must be slaughtered first: Implicit in this command is also the command not to eat the blood of the animal, it must be drained out. This command applies to all humanity since this family now represents the ancestry for all humankind not just the Jewish nation. In rabbinic theology this along with the specifications that will follow form what is called the “Noachide Laws.” It might seem that there would be no necessity for such a law, but history would certainly prove otherwise. Among some, the view is

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 192.

that partaking of the lifeblood of an animal allows one to reinforce one's own vitality through absorption of the life energy inherent in the blood of an animal into one's being.⁵

In the Torah the view is that the blood belongs to God alone as it contains the life-force, it is the symbol of life, which belongs to God alone. Blood played an important role in the cults of the dead in the ancient Near East.⁶ By forbidding the eating of blood, this regulation instills, or at least is intended to instill, a respect for the sacredness of life. Life is a gift of God and all life belongs to Him. Allowing human beings to eat meat is not a license for savagery.⁷

5 And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man (brother) I will require a reckoning for the life (soul) of man.

The slaughter of animals might lead to a dehumanizing of those who slaughter them and so here the sanctity of life

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 61.

⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 61.

⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 144-145.

is reiterated. Murder cannot be perpetrated without the expectation of some form of penalty. The concept of a penalty is not to actually have to implement the penalty but to enforce the concept of the value of life for those who might fail to comprehend that. The term translated as “require a reckoning” (שִׁרָשׁוּ) carries with it the idea of “relentless pursuit until punishment is meted out.”⁸

A couple of points of interest here are the use of the word “brother” (אָח) that is translated above as “fellow man.” This indicates something which would be obvious from the perspective of Noah and his family, but is worth pointing out and that is that all human beings are brothers. Sometimes, especially as the number of people has grown, we have forgotten this, though being a brother did not stop Cain from killing Abel. It should help stop killing.

Secondly, there is the usage of the term “soul” (נֶפֶשׁ), which is translated above as “life.” There is a reminder in the usage of this term of the source of that life and that all

⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 61.

life belongs to God and only He has the right to say what happens to it as the author of life. God then specifies that whoever takes a life will answer to God: He will require a reckoning. This message will be expanded further in the next verse.

**6 “Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.**

This verse very overtly states that whoever shed the blood of man will be held responsible and their life is forfeit. This verse also gives license to mankind to subject this man to death. The reasoning for this is that man is made in the “image” of God. Numbers 35:31 reiterates this ruling and indicates that those guilty of “murder” cannot be ransomed, they must be executed. The rabbis sought every loophole in order to avoid exercising the death penalty and were accused of multiplying murderers in Israel: this accusation was made by Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel who was of fame in both the story of Jesus and Paul. The instrument of this punishment was to be man as the Hebrew text makes very

apparent and plain. This requirement seeks to correct the condition of lawlessness that existed before the flood (6:11). The blood feud is eliminated and murder is no longer a matter that can be privately avenged. The crime is one against God and must be dealt with by society in order to avoid incurring guilt in being complicit with the crime against God by killing those made in His image.⁹

There is a sense that when a person murders he both effaces the image of God in his victim and in himself. He then in some sense becomes something less than human by doing something so heinous and unspeakable as to be totally incongruent with the nature of God.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that even in the popular stories regarding the fictional character Harry Potter murder is said to allow a person to rip their soul into pieces. This section also perhaps gives some reasoning, if such were necessary as to why God destroyed the earth with the flood in the first place.

⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 62.

7 And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

The command that began this section is once again repeated for emphasis.

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

God speaks, what appears to be directly to Noah and his sons as he prepares to initiate a covenant between himself and the patriarchs of the freshly cleansed earth.

9 “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you,

The key term in this section is the term “covenant” (בְּרִית) which is repeated seven times. This is a divine proclamation: at 8:21 God pledges that a universal cataclysmic flood will not occur again; in verse 9:12-17 the world is provided with a visible reminder of this pledge on the part of God.¹¹

This covenant is not only to be made with Noah and his family, but also with their “offspring.” This is a covenant with all of humanity for all time. It will also go beyond just

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 62.

humankind and extend to every living creature that came out of the ark and every living creature on the earth. I have heard it said that all covenants are conditional in nature even when a condition is not cited. In the case of a covenant from a superior party to a lesser party the condition is seldom indicated because the condition of loyalty on the part of the lesser party is understood. A covenant is not always a mutual agreement; a powerful party can make a pact with an inferior party freely and out of good will. In such a case the superior party takes the inferior party under his protection, on condition that the latter remains loyal to him.¹²

Sometimes covenants are accompanied by external signs or tokens to remind the parties of their obligations (Genesis 21:30; 31:44-45; 52; Joshua 24:27, etc.). The Sabbath, the rainbow and circumcision are considered to be signs of three critical stages of the history of mankind. Circumcision came to be regarded in Jewish tradition as the

¹² Moshe Weinfeld, s.v. "Covenant" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1972), pp. 1012-1022.

most distinctive sign of the covenant.¹³

10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth.

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

The covenant is not that there may never be a flood, specifically there will not be a flood of this magnitude, once again emphasizing the universal magnitude of the flood during the time of Noah. If this is a small local flood then the fact that we continue to have small local floods would seem to mean that God’s covenant has been breached innumerable times. This is not the case.

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

¹³ Moshe Weinfeld, s.v. “Covenant,” pp. 1012-1022.

The sign that is given also indicates the universal nature of both the covenant and the flood during the time of Noah. Where do rainbows occur? They occur everywhere there is a cloud and they serve as a covenant marker.

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

The bow set there occurs to mark this proclamation and it is interesting that there are no conditions placed on humanity in this covenant it is totally one-sided. We might today describe it in terms of a solemn promise. The covenant is made with the “earth.”

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

15 I will remember my covenant that 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.

Here we are given the notion of remembering which is not because God is forgetful, but as a marker that causes a bond to be strengthened every time the rainbow comes

through the constancy. It is perhaps a sign of the need on the part of mankind for such reminder; a reminder that we can participate in a divine activity when we remember in this way. The words of Jesus at the Lord's Supper seem to tie into this idea and connect what is being done there in the New Testament with this covenant. This idea of remembering is repeated and emphasized over and over here indicating its great importance. God remembers and this leads to either action or in this instance the withholding of the action of destroying the world by flood.

16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

This covenant is given added impetus in that it is an "everlasting" (עולם) covenant. The idea is likely as long as the world lasts this covenant will remain in force. The covenant is not merely with humankind but with every living creature on the earth.

17 God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is

on the earth.”

Synopsis

This section cites a new beginning point for the earth and all of its inhabitants. Since this is a new beginning God reissues some directives that were given to Adam and Eve, such as “be fruitful and multiply.” He also issues new directives that are intended to act as a corrective for some of the problems that arose on the antedileuvian world. These corrective mandates along with the reiteration of the original plan indicate that God has not given up on His original intent for the world. The directive to “be fruitful and multiply” takes an extremely prominent role in this section being cited right at the beginning of this section and then being repeated.

The next directive deals with the issue of killing, both that which was to be permitted and that which was not to be permitted. The animals appear to in some sense separated further in their relationship with humanity and their role changes. They are now to become part of the food source for humanity. This provision of animals as a food source

comes with regulations to safeguard the sanctity of life and to ensure acknowledgement of God as the source of all life. The sanctity of human life is given special emphasis and very tightly connected to the image of God. The killing of human beings is forbidden by both animals and man, but at the same time someone who kills another man must be put to death by man as a “reckoning” to God.

God establishes a covenant with Noah, his sons, the living creatures and the earth and marks this covenant with an emblem of remembrance that takes the form of a rainbow. This act of remembrance is not a sign that God might forget but a call to action. It calls for God to act in line with His covenant with His creation. Though this covenant is unilateral it does come with the expectation of loyalty on the part of mankind, especially. The teachings of God regarding the nature of the covenant truly begin in earnest here for humankind.

Main Points

- 1. God does not give up on His people or His plan.**
- 2. The relationship between man and animals has changed from what it was at the beginning of creation.**
- 3. Safeguards are initiated to emphasize the sanctity of life.**
- 4. God makes a covenant with His creation and marks it with a marker of remembrance.**