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<sup>21</sup> J. McKeown, “Blessings and Curses,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 577.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” In The Old Testament* (Madison: Society of Biblical Literature, 1987), 165.

## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1996), 26.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) I:398.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 327.
- <sup>5</sup> Gordan J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), xxxii.
- <sup>6</sup> J.H. Hunt, “Noah,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 607.
- <sup>7</sup> J. H. Walton, “Flood,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 315.
- <sup>8</sup> Ed Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen 6:5-9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East,” *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. by Florentino Garcia Martinez and Gerald P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1998), 5.
- <sup>9</sup> Wenhem, 163.
- <sup>10</sup> Noort, 7.
- <sup>11</sup> For an excellent summary of the distinctions in Hebrew theology from the Mesopotamian flood stories, see Norman Cohn, *Noah’s Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 1-9.
- <sup>12</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 29.
- <sup>13</sup> R. G. Branch, “Rainbow,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 668.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> P. R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 139.
- <sup>16</sup> Samuel W. Jennings, *Noah: His Life and Times* (Kilmarnock: John Ritchie Ltd, 1994), 199.
- <sup>17</sup> Dumbrell, 43.
- <sup>18</sup> Williamson, 140.
- <sup>19</sup> M. W. Chavalas, “Moses,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 577.
- <sup>20</sup> Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 400.

with Adam. They argue that 9:1-17 involve bilateral obligations of both man and God,<sup>18</sup> which this exegete also understands as the plain sense of the text. Regardless, treaties in the Near East would include the witness of a sign,<sup>19</sup> in much the same way that contracts today are signed by witnesses. The placement of the bow in the sky as a witness was unilateral on God's part. Freitham comments, "Covenant functions as an equivalent to promise; God is obligated, unilaterally and unconditionally."<sup>20</sup> The Genesis 9:1-17 pericope refers twice to the rainbow as God's sign, as His reminder and witness to Himself.

This leads this student to the last area of historical and cultural context, the concept of blessing. Blessing and curses were also an integral part of treaty agreements in the ancient Near East. Modern man reads that God blessed Noah in 9:1 and understands it to mean that God wished Noah good. But in ancient times the concept of blessing was the power to succeed and had an authoritative impact on the life of an individual so blessed.<sup>21</sup> The meaning of *brk*, "to bless," in the Old Testament is to bestow fertility, prosperity and dominion upon the blessed one.<sup>22</sup> When the blessing comes from God to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:1) or "I give you everything" (Gen. 9:3), the reader of the text in ancient Israel would understand that with God's great power, authority and dominion, this blessing involved more than just permission. It meant the ability to accomplish the blessing, with God as an ally and not as an enemy.

The blessing of God in tandem with the covenant of God anchored by the sign of God was a compelling reminder of God's favor upon His people to the first redactors and readers of the Pentateuch. And while today's reader also can be encouraged by a contemporary reading of the words of Genesis 9:1-17, he or she could be much more strengthened in faith by understanding the context of the flood narrative, knowing the significance of the covenant, resting in the sign of the bow, and rejoicing in the blessing of the Lord God.

peace with men and as a reminder to himself, looks upon his bow in the sky. This can be even more clearly understood when one knows that in the ancient Near East the bow was a symbol of male strength and virility, and surrendering it up was sign of emasculation in warfare.<sup>13</sup> It is significant that the sign of the rainbow is a reminder to God of His promises, and not a reminder to mankind, as is often mistakenly believed. Even this concept of a reminder sign has its roots in ancient Near East flood myth of the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the goddess savior wears a colorful necklace as a reminder of these flood days.<sup>14</sup> One does not have to believe these stories to be source material for the Genesis flood account to appreciate the additional layers of meaning they provide. The rainbow itself was not necessarily created for the first time after the flood, but in its shape and in its many colors, carried meaning to those of the ancient Near East now lost on modern man.

To further understand the significance of the rainbow as a sign, one must also garner an appreciation for the sign as part of the covenant in ancient times. The word for covenant (*berit*) is found 82 times in the Pentateuch<sup>15</sup> and is used for the very first time in the flood narrative (Genesis 6:18). It is significant that this word is repeated seven different times throughout the Gen. 9:1-17 passage under consideration. Seven is the number of perfection, of completion, and thus signifies great importance to this passage.<sup>16</sup> According to W.J. Dumbrell, in the ancient Near East, the use of *berit* refers to the “backing of a quasi-legal nature given at the stage of the conclusion of the *berit*, to a prior relationship.”<sup>17</sup> Dumbrell argues for the covenant given in the Noah flood account to harken back to the creation account of Adam, thus continuing and reestablishing the original creation, and the inherent unilateral promises of God to Adam. Dumbrell believes the creation promises should be applied to Noah. Many scholars take exception to Dumbrell’s conclusion of applying this covenant to a reestablishment of the creation

historical and cultural contexts in the brief space of this paper: the context of the flood narrative, the rainbow, the covenant, and the blessing.

It is most helpful, though perhaps troubling to the novice Bible scholar, to know that there were numerous flood narratives in existence in the ancient Near East at the time of the writing and editing of Genesis 6-9, including the Sumerian account, dating to seventeenth century BCE, the Atrahasis account, also dating to the seventeenth century BCE, and the Gilgamesh Epic, dating to the seventh century BCE.<sup>7</sup> Ed Noort summarizes the view that “these dates by themselves indicate a probable Mesopotamian influence on the Biblical stories.”<sup>8</sup> Of course one could argue that the early story of Noah’s flood predated the Mesopotamian stories, and indeed was the source material for the other narratives circulating in the ancient Near East.<sup>9</sup> This student, however, concludes the Mesopotamian influence because: (1) the archeological fragments discovered in the last 150 years strongly lean towards it; (2) the Mesopotamian region itself was subject to catastrophic flooding<sup>10</sup> and, thus the flood story can easily be understood in that context; and (3), regardless of Yawist or Priestly or unified authorship, one can appreciate the desire of the Biblical redactors to take a well known ancient Near East story and provide the correct Hebrew theology of God, man, sin and restoration.<sup>11</sup> This need not diminish one’s faith in God’s inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and indeed, could strengthen it. After all, it would take the omnipotence of God to preserve the flood story through the centuries and only at the right time and place, with the right people, reveal the right theological implications of the story.

The rainbow, when understood within its original cultural context, sheds additional light on Genesis 9:1-7. Parallels can be suggested between the sign of the rainbow and the Babylonian creation epic Enuma Elish, where the champion of the gods, Marduk, hung his bow in the heavens as a sign of peace.<sup>12</sup> It would follow that the Lord God, in Genesis 9, has made

The pericope of Genesis 9:1-17 challenges the most advanced students of the Bible, when it comes to the issue of providing historical and cultural context. The goal of such endeavors is to learn about the world of the text and the writers. But in the case of Genesis 9, no clear consensus of authorship or historical dating has evolved in Biblical scholarship. Classical scholarship, originating with the German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), considers the Pentateuch to have been redacted by four different sources: Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P).<sup>1</sup> These four sources, it was believed, reworked their written materials over a five hundred year period of time, dating from the ninth to the fifth century BCE.<sup>2</sup> The flood story found in Genesis 6 – 9, in particular, has been thought of to alternate between J and P, with most of the speeches of God in the current text under consideration assigned to the Priestly writer.<sup>3</sup> This would imply that the underlying editing of these verses probably took place during the Babylonian exile, and thus would focus this exegete's attention to the fifth century BCE.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, several studies have more recently argued for a literary integrity of this source material, which could provide for an earlier dating.<sup>5</sup>

J. H. Hunt provides a third alternative, which this student adopts for his research: "In the end we are not left with only two options: a hodgepodge of multiple sources or a unified composition. A third approach recognizes the composite nature of Noah's story and looks for meaningful or sensible editing."<sup>6</sup> The reason for adoption of this viewpoint is (1) the acknowledgment that the Biblical text does not speak for itself in terms of authorship or exact dating and (2) the fact that regardless of when the text was finally pressed into its' final form, it references a history and a story that took place long before its final form. Hence, this student should look for and understand both the historical and cultural context of the story itself as well as the final authors and redactors. In this respect, this writer will focus his attention on four

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT  
GENESIS 9:1-17

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A MAJOR PROJECT  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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