

What is the rainbow in Genesis a reminder of?

This year during Pride month, God seems to have a lot of rainbow defenders online. But they aren't getting the Bible story quite right.

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June 12, 2024



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June is the time to celebrate the festive Noahic Covenant Month—or so I'm told by legions of Christians on social media who want to "take back the rainbow" from LGBTQ people like me. "The rainbow belongs to God," many of these posts say. "It's not Pride month—it's Promise month!" says another. One of the viral posts even includes a picture of Satan making a rainbow flag at a sewing machine, which is, to be quite honest, not a skill I expected him to have.

There are thousands of these posts, and my husband and I have gotten more than a few chuckles from reading them together. But they all seem to revolve around a similar idea: LGBTQ people—and anyone else celebrating Pride—have stolen the rainbow from God. This complaint is based on a reading of the story of Noah's flood, recounted in Genesis 6–9. After causing the flood waters to recede, God establishes a covenant with Noah:

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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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. (Gen. 9:12–16)

Rainbows, then, are reminders of God's mercy. But reminders to whom? The rainbow isn't placed in the sky to be a sign for humans. (The passage doesn't even say that humans can see it.) According to the story, the rainbow causes *God* to remember God's covenant.

So the rainbow is there for God to see. But what does he need to be reminded of? Let's go back a few chapters:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Gen. 6:5–8)

According to the Genesis flood story, God is angry at humans for being evil, and the only solution he can think of is to "blot out" the human race—along with land animals and birds—from the face of the earth. Sure, when we get to the rainbow, things read a little more nicely. But we can't forget that the rainbow exists in this story as a reminder to God not to fly into a psychopathic murder rage. You know, like he did that one time.

This rainbow story—the one about God destroying almost all the life he created—is, I have learned from many of my Christian sisters and brothers, preferable to any story having to do with queerness. In fact, they tell me that any rainbow story LGBTQ people offer—and we offer a few; my personal favorites involve Judy Garland—is nothing more than a perversion of the real story that Genesis recounts.

Well, to these folks' horror, my theology has been influenced in no small part by queerness, so I get very skeptical when folks start throwing around words like "original" and talking about "the real meaning" of a symbol or Bible passage. Mostly because, as all queers have learned from Judith Butler, any "original" is only ever a copy of a copy. Or to put it in hermeneutical terms: there is no uninterpreted explanation of a Bible passage.

For instance, I haven't seen any of God's rainbow defenders get the story exactly right. None of them mentions God's killing spree. That's kind of a big plot point to overlook. Genesis doesn't say the rainbow is a symbol of God's mercy; it says the rainbow is intended to remind him to calm down, to not let his anger get the best of him, to not drown toddlers in raging flood waters. To strategically leave out this part of the story is to engage in the same sort of agenda-driven queer interpretation that gay theologians, like me, often get accused of engaging in.

Here's a clearer example of God's rainbow defenders misreading the very text they're ostensibly protecting from being misread. The Hebrew word we translate here as rainbow (*qeset*) pops up more than 70 times in the Bible, and almost every time it refers instead to the bow of a warrior. This has led some commentators to see in the flood story a reference to ancient warfare: God has just assaulted the earth with torrential rains for 40 days, and now it's time for peace. So he turns his bow up to the heavens.

Biblical scholar Luiz Gustavo Assis points both to ancient literature and to iconography to make the case that turning a bow away from your enemies *and onto yourself* was understood to signal a warrior's "non-hostile intent despite their capacity to harm." It's as if after a shootout with you, I point my gun at myself to communicate that I have a gun, but I'm not going to use it.

If this is what the post-flood rainbow evokes, then Christians who are up in arms against LGBTQ people might take a cue from God and put down their weapons. God's bow is an invitation to peace.

Not everyone agrees with these interpretations of the rainbow. Some biblical scholars, such as Laurence A. Turner, believe the bow shape is meant to evoke the firmament from the creation stories, while others, including Ellen van Wolde, suggest that the bow signifies that God has transferred his power from himself to the humans he has created in his image.

There are things I like about each of these interpretations. There are also things left wanting—not least the fact that most of them focus almost exclusively on the shape of the rainbow and overlook its colors. To me—to Judy—the colors seem to be the most important part of the phenomenon.

“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it,” says Shug in *The Color Purple*. Whatever else a rainbow might mean, it is first and foremost there for our enjoyment. I don’t want to look at a rainbow and see a warrior or a firmament or a contract. I want to see vibrant colors—stunning reds and shimmering yellows that remind me of all the beauty in the world. A rainbow isn’t there to be interpreted but to be experienced.

When Ezekiel says that the glory of the Lord was “like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain” (Ezek. 1:28), sure, we can hear overtones of ancient warrior imagery, but let’s not dismiss the aesthetic dimensions of his vision: God is beautiful. There is something inviting and delightful about God’s glory. To catch a glimpse of it is to be overwhelmed by all the dizzying shades of divinity.

All these ideas are at play in scripture, and none of them needs to have a monopoly on our reading. I’ve emphasized the laying down of arms reading because I think that it has prophetic potential to help us leave behind our culture wars. On other days, other readings might be more helpful. There is a genius in God’s self-revelation in literature: God has given us permission to never arrive at certainty of interpretation. If we ever think we find it, then we ought to turn our bows onto ourselves and attack our own readings.

This is yet another lesson we can learn from rainbows. They don’t exist in the sky. You can’t touch them or locate them. They are optical illusions. We see them based on where we’re standing. Rainbows reflect light; they also reflect *us*—our own subject positions, our own ways of seeing and making sense of the world.

No wonder, then, that the rainbow battles can seem so fierce. We’re not fighting over a bow or an arc or a firmament. We’re fighting, desperately, for the ability to

say, "I'm right about God."

But even God isn't always right about God. That's another lesson from the Genesis rainbow. If God regretted creating humanity, he certainly regrets destroying it. He places his bow in the sky to remind himself never again to make that mistake, never again to rush to judgment, never again to be too certain about his interpretation of a situation. The rainbow reminds God to look for beauty in the very people he's tempted to dismiss as irredeemably evil, to remember that he takes pride in all of his creatures.

"Take another look," the rainbow tells all of us—God included. "There's more going on here than you originally assumed."