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3 **Rainbow**

4 **Historical changes in experiencing a natural phenomenon**

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8 **Abstract** In classical Antiquity a rainbow appeared before the rain, while
9 nowadays it can usually be seen after it has rained. Ancient Greeks and Romans
10 were not happy when they saw a rainbow, although they also found it beautiful. This
11 paper examines the ancient ideas associated with the rainbow and the way the
12 import or perhaps admixture of Jewish and Christian ideas laid the basis of the
13 European tradition for a phenomenon that appears after the rain, and that is sup-
14 posed to make people happy.

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16 **Keywords** Rainbow · Religious history · Classical Antiquity · Iris · Bible

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19 The world, or so-called reality, exists for a human being through or in language.
20 Language, cultural embedment, tradition are the forces that determine what and how
21 one can perceive all the phenomena around. This philosophical commonplace must
22 be remembered always when one wants to discuss the ancient perception and
23 interpretation of a natural phenomenon such as the rainbow. I can also put it this
24 way: the basic difference between the rainbows in classical Antiquity and at the
25 present time is a consequence of the different cultural traditions.

26 The most eye-catching difference is that in classical Antiquity a rainbow appeared
27 before the rain, while nowadays it can usually be seen after it has rained. Since our
28 scientific worldview excludes the possibility that the laws of nature have been
29 changed since classical Antiquity, we must look for the causes of the difference in the
30 ways humans see things. Sight does not figure for perception here since a rainbow is
31 an optical phenomenon that presupposes an eye; it cannot exist but from the point a

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32 view and for a perceiving subject.¹ Meteorologists say a rainbow can be seen either
 33 before or after rain, and this statement is based on the scientific explanation of the
 34 phenomenon and careful observation of nature. It is probably our cultural
 35 conditioning that prevents us, modern humans, from noticing it before rain too. If
 36 something like that can be seen, one might neglect it, or forget it after a bit of wonder.
 37 The sight of a rainbow before rain cannot arouse the elevating emotion that is
 38 associated with a rainbow in our culture. If one sees a rainbow before rain, i.e., in an
 39 “abnormal” situation, one will not have the “rainbow-experience.” And this is the
 40 second difference: ancient Greeks and Romans were not happy at all when they saw a
 41 rainbow,² although they also found it beautiful.³ The only ancient locus where a
 42 rainbow makes people happy is Quintus Smyrnaeus *Posthomerica* 1.63–69; and even
 43 there it predicts rain. In this paper I am going to examine the ancient ideas associated
 44 with the rainbow and the way the import or perhaps admixture of Jewish and Christian
 45 ideas laid the basis of the European tradition for a phenomenon that appears after the
 46 rain, and that is supposed to make people happy.

47 The first author to be considered is of course Homer, who makes the rainbow
 48 appear in a simile as a definitely bad omen:

49 ἤϋτε πορφυρέην ἶριν θνητοῖσι τανύσση
 50 Ζεὺς ἐξ οὐρανόθεν τέρας ἔμμεναι ἢ πολέμοιο
 51 ἢ καὶ χειμῶνος δυσθαλπέος, ὅς ῥά τε ἔργων
 52 ἀνθρώπους ἀνέπαυσεν ἐπὶ χθονί, μῆλα δὲ κήδει,

(*Il.* 17.547–550)

54 A rainbow is an irregular, unusual, abnormal phenomenon in nature, and
 55 therefore it must be regarded as an omen. It signifies that something is wrong with
 56 the harmony of the world. Such omens—and indeed everything that contradicts the
 57 rules of nature, as e.g., a monster—is called τέρας in Greek. The rainbow is a τέρας
 58 that Zeus, who is responsible for celestial phenomena, has put on the sky to forewarn
 59 people of a danger to come. That danger can be not only a rain, or a storm, but also a
 60 war. It foretells of a disaster to come that in most cases has some connection with
 61 rain, which does not seem surprising. The fact that it is a τέρας, might explain on the
 62 one hand why it appears before rain in western Antiquity (because it necessarily
 63 foretells something), on the other hand why it does not make people happy (because
 64 it foretells something bad to come).

65 In the Homeric epics no direct connection can be seen between the rainbow and
 66 the goddess Iris, who plays the role of Zeus’ messenger. This function as a
 67 messenger remains a characteristic of her even later, but it becomes more and more
 68 strictly connected with Hera, while Hermes becomes the only messenger of Zeus. In

¹ This declaration can slightly modified by the fact that infrared rainbows are said to exist, i.e., rainbows that are unperceivable for the human eye. In this case a special camera substitutes for the human subject. The camera, however, must be put in the right place to take the photo of the optical phenomenon and to make it visible for the human eye in the form of a photograph.

² “Den Regenbogen nennt Homer, P 547, als ein Himmelszeichen, das den Menschen Unerwünschtes verkündet, während wir uns freuen, weil er ankündigt, dass der Regen aufhört.” (von Willamowitz-Moellendorf 1931, vol. 1, pp. 263–264, n. 2.).

³ Cic. *Nat.* 3.20.51.

69 Hesiodus' *Theogony*, however, the identity of goddess Iris with the rainbow is rather
 70 clear. The goddess has been fathered by Thaumas, son of Pontus and Gaia, brother
 71 of Nereus (*Theog.* 235–239). Iris' attribute of being “fast” suggests that she is
 72 identical with the gods' messenger, but her mother is Electra, the daughter of
 73 Oceanus, and her sisters, the harpyias Ocypetes and Aello seem to be some storm
 74 goddesses or whirlwinds (*Theog.* 265–269).⁴ Her connection with water in general
 75 and especially with tempests is rather clear. Hesiodus, however, connects Iris also
 76 with the nether world, more exactly, with its waters. Any time discord or conflict
 77 rises among the gods, or a god has lied, she brings Stygian water in her golden jar.⁵
 78 Nowadays people tend to be surprised by the Greek associations of rainbow and
 79 tempest, conflict, discord, the nether world.

80 Iris has, of course, many other functions. In the arts she is usually represented
 81 with a water jar in her hands, which does not probably contain Stygian water, since
 82 in the usual scene represents a sacrifice, not taking an oath. Zeus sacrifices—with
 83 Hera or alone—and Iris provides help. The identification of those winged female
 84 figures with Iris is actually not certain, since nothing differentiates her from Nike.⁶
 85 The wings sign her function as a messenger, an inter-mediator.⁷ If that function is
 86 signalled also by a kerykeion, the female figure can be easily identified, as in the
 87 case of the scheme that shows her between two satyrs, holding a piece of meat.
 88 According to a convincing reconstruction of the myth, she has been sent by Hera to
 89 prevent a sacrifice to be offered to Dionysus, and she is presented in a moment when
 90 she has already taken the sacrificial meat from the altar by force, but the satyrs are
 91 trying to get it back.⁸ Iris is usually depicted as helping or preventing a sacrifice.

92 Some popular beliefs attach the messenger-Iris' function as mediator between the
 93 sky and the nether world and between gods and humans to the rainbow, which is
 94 Iris. The rainbow as a τέρας, of course, mediates a message from the gods to humans,
 95 but there are also some quasi-scientific beliefs suggesting that it pumps up the water
 96 from the sea or the rivers and forwards it to the clouds. In this case it not simply
 97 foretells, but causes rain, and it simultaneously creates a connection between earthy
 98 and celestial waters. The clearest formulation of this belief can be found in the
 99 narrative of the flood in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

⁴ Θαύμας δ' Ἰκεανοῖο βαθυρρεΐταιο θυγάτρα
 ἠγάγετ' Ἠλέκτρην· ἥ δ' ὠκεΐαν τέκεν Ἴριν
 ἠυκόμοιους θ' Ἀρπυΐας Αελλῶ τ' Ἰκυπέτην τε,
 αἳ ῥ' ἀνέμων ποιεῖσι καὶ οἰωνοῖς ἅμ' ἔπονται
 ὠκείης πτερύγεσσι· μεταχρόνια γὰρ ἴαλλον.

⁵ παῦρα δὲ Θαύμαντος θυγάτηρ πόδας ὠκέα Ἴρις
 ἀγγελίην πολεῖται ἐπ' εὐρέα νῶτα θαλάσσης.
 ὀππότ' ἔρις καὶ νεῖκος ἐν ἀθανάτοισιν ὄρηται
 καὶ ῥ' ὅστις ψεύδηται Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἐχόντων,
 Ζεὺς δέ τε Ἴριν ἐπεμψε θεῶν μέγαν ὄρκον ἐνεῖκαι
 τηλόθεν ἐν χρυσῆι προχόῳ πολυώνυμον ὕδωρ. (*Theog.* 780–785).

⁶ Kossatz-Deissmann (1990, 746–747).

⁷ Kossatz-Deissmann (1990, 758).

⁸ Simon (1953, 62–65).

100 nuntia Iunonis varios induta colores
 101 concipit Iris aquas alimenta que nubibus adfert.
 102 (*Met.* 1.270–71)

103 Also Virgil makes it figure in the list of signs foretelling a tempest,⁹ and (pseudo-)
 104 Plutarch mentions it as the conception of some philosophers: διὸ καὶ ἐμυθεύσαντό
 105 τινες αὐτὴν ταύρου κεφαλὴν ἔχουσαν ἀναρροφεῖν ποταμούς.¹⁰ These examples
 106 suggest that Iris' mediating function does not necessarily mean the comforting
 107 creation of balance, since the bull headed creature that absorbs whole rivers seems
 108 rather demonic, and the mediation finally results in a tempest, or in Ovid's work in
 109 the Flood. The negative connotations of Iris' figure are most extremely formalised by
 110 Servius, who makes a parallel between Iris and Eris: "Iris quasi Ἔρις dicta est,
 111 numquam enim ad conciliationem mittitur, sed ad disturbance[m]."¹¹ This idea is
 112 not Servius' personal invention; Hesychius' lexicon identifies Iris with Eris (it
 113 makes Eris one of Iris' significations),¹² and a scholion to Homer also suggests
 114 that.¹³ But the situation does not seem so terrifying even in the *Aeneid*. When she
 115 helps Dido enter the other world, she performs a rather merciful mission. Ovid
 116 makes Iris' connection with the nether world, with waters, and her mediating
 117 function unite in a vision of positive values when she purifies Juno, who returns
 118 from the nether world, through spraying her with water; and after that Juno can enter
 119 the sky.¹⁴

120 Roman poets applied Greek mythology as a means of expression or a code to
 121 communicate a basically conceptual way of thinking,¹⁵ and they could not find the
 122 identity of Iris the rainbow (that is a bow connecting earth and sky and mediating
 123 waters) with Iris the winged messenger of the gods evident at all.¹⁶ Therefore, they
 124 elaborated various logical constructions to connect the rainbow with the goddess'
 125 person. The simplest one is to present the rainbow as the path of Iris flying between
 126 the sky and the earth. As a rainbow one can perceive either the way in which she is
 127 going or her very flight outlined in the sky due to the sunlight glittering on the
 128 colourful feathers of her wings.¹⁷ Iris' colourful cloth also might be the rainbow.¹⁸ It
 129 would have been, however, unfair to make an opposition between Greeks and
 130 uncomprehending Romans, who tried to use logic to find various solutions; similar

⁹ et bibit ingens arcus, *Georg.* 1.380–81.

¹⁰ *Placita philosophorum.* 894b8–9.

¹¹ Ad *Aeneid* V. 606.

¹² Iota 888.

¹³ Ad Hom. *Λ 27 ἐς ε 29*; also cf. Roscher (1890–94), vol. 2, 331, and Renel (1902, 70–71).

¹⁴ *Met.* 4.479–480.

¹⁵ For the relations of conceptual thinking and mythology see Kerényi (1939, 170).

¹⁶ Not even religion studies in the twentieth century are always willing to accept this identity. A historical explanation supposes that one of the ideas developed after the other. E.g., the rainbow can be said to have been originally the path of gods through which they could enter the human sphere, and this idea could later have gone through anthropomorphisation to become the messenger of gods (Renel 1902, 75–77).

¹⁷ Verg, *Aen.* 5.609–10.

¹⁸ Ov. *Met.* 11.589–90.

131 ideas might have developed also in a Greek context. The rainbow seems to be
 132 sometimes identified with Iris' belt. And it is the belt with which Iris conducted the
 133 Nemea lion. A passage of Pseudo-Plutarchus narrates that Hera asked Selene to
 134 create that monster through magic, and Iris brought it to Mount Opheltion with her
 135 belt.¹⁹ The belt is not explicitly identified with the rainbow here, but such an
 136 inference sounds logical.²⁰ The story is represented in an amphora Beazley
 137 attributed to the Diosphoros painter and put around 500,²¹ but no leash or belt used
 138 as a leash can be seen on that picture. Iris is holding a long staff, which probably is
 139 not a *kerykeion*, since it does not have the characteristic top, although the top might
 140 have disappeared.²² It may be too long to be a *kerykeion* as well. I think it is rather a
 141 crook with which Iris is to shepherd the lion. Iris appears also here as a mediator
 142 between sky and earth, or perhaps the nether world. The queen of the sky wanted the
 143 monster to be created, which must be driven to the earth. It will live in a cave, i.e.,
 144 under the earth, and it has the air of a deadly, Stygian creature.²³ After being killed
 145 by Hercules it returns to the sky in the form of a constellation.²⁴ Iris is responsible
 146 for the displacements, and according to a later version that seems to aim for a more
 147 rigorously logical concept, she does it with her belt, which is probably the rainbow.

148 The scene of Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Iris goes to Carthage to end Dido's life was
 149 hinted at earlier. It might be worth discussing here in some detail.

150 Ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis
 151 mille trahens uarios aduerso sole colores
 152 deuolat.
 153 (*Aen.* 4. 700–702)

154 Virgil seems to connect messenger Iris, the mediator between sky, earth and the
 155 nether world, with the phenomenon of the rainbow (this kind of connection,
 156 however suggests the existence of two separate entities that can be connected, even
 157 if Iris herself is called dewy). This poetic image also contains the scientific
 158 explanation of the rainbow, which was known by ancient philosophers. The most
 159 exhaustive description, I think, is offered by Seneca in the introductory passages of
 160 his *Naturales quaestiones*.²⁵ Through the phrases *roscida* and *aduerso sole* Virgil
 161 hints at that explanation, i.e., at the sunrays reflected by drops of steam, but being a
 162 poet he makes those drops sit on the wings of the goddess, and not be part of a cloud

¹⁹ Ἡρα γὰρ παρ' Ἡρακλέους δίκας βουλομένη λαβεῖν συνεργὸν παρέλαβε τὴν Σελήνην· ἡ δὲ ἐπωδαῖς χρησαμένη μάγῳς ἀφροῦ κίστην ἐκλήρωσεν, ἐξ ἧς γεννηθέντα λέοντα μέγιστον Ἴρις ταῖς ἰδίαις ζώναις ἐπισφίγγουσα κατήνεγκεν εἰς ὄρος Ὀφέλιον. *de fluv.* 18.

²⁰ Kossatz-Deissmann (1990, 742) discusses this identification as a fact.

²¹ New York, MMA X.21.15. (G. R. 523); Beazley (1928, p. 6, n. 4).

²² Moore and Bothmer (1976, 65): "In her right hand, Iris holds a staff. Since the top is not shown it is not certain if it is a *kerykeion*."

²³ Kerényi (1959, 140–141).

²⁴ Eratosthenes, *Catasterismi* 12.

²⁵ 1.5–6.

167 as a philosopher would like. The scientific explanation, however, was able to
 168 eliminate only a part of the negative connotations of the rainbow, since the
 169 possibility of foretelling—in this case foretelling meteorological events—was also
 170 implied in that concept. Seneca says that a rainbow seen at noon signifies a big
 171 tempest, but one seen in the evening signifies a light rain, while a rainbow at dawn
 172 foretells of nice weather.²⁶ In classical Antiquity even the scientific observation (or
 173 in this case rather scientific speculation) had the conclusion that a rainbow usually
 174 appears before rain, and even it is followed by sunshine, it is not preceded by rain
 175 but by sunrise.²⁷

176 Virgil made the scientific explanation of the rainbow only faintly colour the
 177 mythical-poetical description. In a series of epigrams of the *Anthologia Latina*,
 178 however, the scientific explanation appears as an autonomous topic of poetry. On
 179 the one hand the three line epigrams connect the correct scientific explanation with
 180 some mythological common places, on the other hand they play with the contrasts
 181 of sunray and raindrop, of sunshine and cloud.²⁸

182 In the classical tradition the rainbow appears before rain and it has rather grim
 183 associations, since it is strictly connected with tempest, conflict, and death. These
 184 ideas apparently contradict the modern attitude towards the rainbow, and therefore
 185 the question necessarily arises of what ideas on the rainbow other nations and ages
 186 had. Is the dreadful rainbow a specialty of Classical Antiquity? Or is it rather the
 187 general attitude, and what has to be explained is the development of modern views?
 188 How is a rainbow appreciated in the non-classical tradition of the ancient period that
 189 also had basic influence on the development of European ways of thinking, i.e., in
 190 the Hebrew culture?

191 Let me have a look at the heritage of folklore before turning back to the ancient
 192 period. It goes without saying that the rainbow is almost everywhere associated with
 193 water or rain. It, however, can be regarded a factor preventing rain. A tribe in
 194 Central-Australia thought that the rainbow is the son of the rain, and he prevents his
 195 father from falling to the earth²⁹; one needs some magic songs to make him
 196 disappear from the sky and to allow it to rain. This example shows that the idea of a
 197 rainbow appearing before rain is not a peculiarity of Classical Antiquity. Since we
 198 know which climatic conditions Australia has, we find it rather improbable that they
 199 do not sing the magical songs because they happen not to want any rain. The

²⁶ *Nat. qu.* 1.6.1.

²⁷ A sentence transmitted in Plato's *Cratylus* also seems to raise positive associations, but editors tend to exclude it as a marginal note slipped into the text, and they are apparently right. It makes Iris' name and function as a messenger connected with speech, i.e., the verb εἶπεν, instead of Ἔρις. One cannot know when that marginal note was written, but it may be a monument of a later than classical concept (καὶ ἦ γὰρ Ἴρις ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶπεν εὐοικεν κεκλημένη, ὅτι ἄγγελος ἦν, 408b5–6).

²⁸ *Anth. Lat.* (Shackleton-Bailey) 543–554: *Tristicha de arcu caeli*.

It is worthwhile quoting the poem no. 545 as a single sample:

Clara sub aetheriis fulget Thaumantia proles
 nubibus, ut radiis pluuium sol attingit imbrem,
 et picturato caelum uelamine cingit.

²⁹ Frazer (1936, vol. 1, 258). Fishermen in Szeged, Hungary were reported to think that a rainbow causes aridity, since it sucks up waters from the earth. Beke (1934, 44).

200 rainbow does not foretell the rain in this concept, but it signals that the conditions of
 201 rain exist at the moment, but some magical human intervention is needed to realise
 202 this possibility.

203 Charles Renel stated that most peoples see rainbows after rain,³⁰ but this
 204 impression might be the result of the preconceptions of the anthropologists who had
 205 collected or published the data to which Renel refers. They might have taken their
 206 own views as granted, and therefore they might have unconsciously projected them
 207 on the fragmentary, not circumstantially explained narratives of the natives. An
 208 example from Hungarian folklore may show how this projection works. The
 209 Hungarian word for the rainbow, *szivárvány*, is etymologically connected with the
 210 verb *szív*, i.e., ‘suck (up)’. (In some dialects the same word therefore can signify
 211 ‘gourd’ or ‘well-pump’.) The word expresses the view generally accepted by Finno-
 212 Ugric peoples (which is, as it has been demonstrated, not their peculiarity) that a
 213 rainbow sucks up water from the earth to the sky. It is logical to suppose that the
 214 rainbow performs this activity before the rain. Why suck back the water to the sky
 215 just after it has fallen down in the form of rain? Nevertheless, one can read such
 216 scholarly explanations of the popular belief. Géza Bárczi simply said that
 217 “according to the popular belief the heavenly rainbow sucks up water”³¹ without
 218 indicating whether it is done before or after rain. But another linguist reformulated
 219 Bárczi’s very sentence as follows: “This denomination is based on the popular belief
 220 that the rainbow sucks up the water after the rain.”³² He feels the appearance of the
 221 rainbow after rain so evident that he thinks it is implied in Bárczi’s sentence as well,
 222 although he knows that there are other views among Finno-Ugric peoples. On the
 223 same page he describes the beliefs of the Zyrians that explain their denomination
 224 of the rainbow *jen-eš*, which means god’s ox or heavenly ox: “That animal walking
 225 in the sky sucks up the water of rivers and springs, and that is the origin of clouds
 226 and rain.” Any explanation that supposes a rainbow sucks up water after rain is
 227 probably false I think, but the existence of scholarly hypotheses that try to explain
 228 why it is needed to suck back the water into the sky shows how hard it is for a
 229 modern scholar to realise the possibility that a rainbow appears before rain.
 230 Therefore, one should be careful about Renel’s general statement on folkloric
 231 beliefs that most people see rainbows after rain.

232 Most cultures react with fear to the phenomenon of rainbows.³³ It is interpreted
 233 as a giant snake or a man-eating monster, which might be explained by the belief
 234 that the rainbow, while sucking up water to the sky, sometimes sniffs up children,
 235 humans or cattle with it.³⁴ A dialect version of the Hungarian word for the rainbow,

³⁰ Renel (1902, 61).

³¹ Bárczi (1941, 292).

³² Horváth (1949, 51).

³³ See Renel (1902, 62–66) and Boyer (1987, 25).

³⁴ The belief of the man-eating rainbow appears also in the Hungarian folklore, and it was described already in the eighteenth century, see Beke (1934, 45). A rainbow was believed to be able to sniff up a man with his boat, if it found him on the water of Lake Balaton; this idea suggests that the rainbow was supposed to appear before rain, since it was improbable that someone be rowing after a rather dangerous tempest on the lake.

236 *szuhárgyán* means a fabulous monster of unappeasable appetite,³⁵ and the many
 237 small worms crawling around after rain were explained through the idea that the
 238 rainbow sniffed up many small animals with the water.³⁶ Some German, Chinese
 239 and Hungarian people share the superstition that one should not point to a rainbow
 240 with a finger, because it may catch the finger and sniff up the whole man.³⁷

241 The rainbow is not, however, necessarily associated with water. In Bas-Quercy,
 242 France the red colour dominates the interpretation; the rainbow is something fiery,
 243 which burns and destroys grape and beans. Some tribes fear it because they think it
 244 is a net that a mighty daemon uses to catch the shadows (i.e., the souls, probably) of
 245 humans.³⁸

246 Many peoples regard the rainbow a weapon of deity³⁹ or a route between sky and
 247 earth.⁴⁰ It goes without saying, I suppose, that one will not feel sincere happiness
 248 when looking at the weapons of the gods. Deities are generally supposed to be going
 249 to shoot lightning to the earth with that bow.⁴¹ This idea seems rather frightening,
 250 although one may have the comfort that the bow, which points from the sky to the
 251 earth, is not drawn. Even if the rainbow is interpreted as a route between sky and
 252 earth, it might be frightening too. People may react with fear also to a sign of the
 253 possibility of transgression between divine and human spheres of existence or to the
 254 direct appearance of transcendental phenomena. People in the Christian West tend
 255 to imagine divinity as the heavenly Father, who takes care of us. But it is exactly the
 256 evangel, the good news that Jesus brought to humanity. The appearance of
 257 transcendence, therefore, tends to be accepted as a happy event, as the sign of divine
 258 mercy (but only if it comes from above). This is, however, not at all evident in a
 259 non-Christian context. When the mortal and powerless human being is standing face
 260 to face with a mighty god, that experience cannot be joyful for him unless the
 261 benevolence of the divinity is proved in advance, which is, however, usually not the
 262 case. The list of the myths where the divine epiphany, the direct appearance of
 263 transcendental beings is dreadful or it results in the perdition of humans would be
 264 endless. If the rainbow is a bridge, through which a divinity can directly enter the
 265 human sphere, it does not mean at all that one should be happy seeing one. The idea
 266 that “Throughout human history, rainbows have been symbols of hope, optimism,
 267 good luck, and even riches”⁴² can hardly be proved. Although the rainbow is
 268 interpreted as a bridge or a route between sky and earth in many cultures, such
 269 bridging does not suggest hope or confidence by any means.

³⁵ Beke (1953, 459–462).

³⁶ Lázár (1896, 563).

³⁷ Renel (1902, 65) and Beke (1934, 45).

³⁸ Frazer (1936, vol. 3, 79).

³⁹ Renel (1902, 59), Boyer (1987, 26). For the Finno-ugric tradition see Horváth (1949, 51).

⁴⁰ Renel (1902, 60), Boyer (1987, 27–28).

⁴¹ In addition to the references in note 40, see Goldziher (1876, 195).

⁴² Utke (1996, 26). That author, being a professor of chemistry, is not really informed of ancient literature and ancient concepts of the rainbow; not only thinks he that rainbows appeared in the Antiquity after rain, but also that one finds Iris' family tree in the *Iliad* and that “the Greek word for miracle is also *thaumas*” (25).

270 Readers of Mircea Eliade's *The Holy and the Profane* might think that the
 271 appearance of a sign of possible transgressions between the spheres of existence
 272 must be the happy moment of mercy coming. The places of transgression, or
 273 contact, are the organising centres of human worlds for that scholar, whom I regard
 274 the most remarkable representative of an attitude that contributes to a Christian and
 275 philanthropic interpretation of religious history. In Eliade's concept the holy is the
 276 world of a pure and original existence. A pre-historical human being of any culture
 277 is supposed to be longing for those pure origins with eternal nostalgia. Eliade's man
 278 is always aiming for the holy; he always wants to be near it, and he experiences the
 279 profane as deprivation. Since many data of anthropological descriptions suggest that
 280 people are rather scared in front of the rainbow, which they regard as a bridge
 281 between divine and human spheres, we should refer to the book with which Mircea
 282 Eliade engages a discussion, i.e., Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto did not
 283 think that the experience of the divine, however fascinating and interesting it may
 284 be, can lack a terrible and frightening element. And it is exactly the element that he
 285 describes as the most original, the most direct, and the least rationalised one in
 286 religiousness. "It may well be possible, it is even probable, that in the first stage of
 287 its development the religious consciousness started with only one of its poles—the
 288 'daunting' aspect of the numen—and so at first took shape only as 'daemonic
 289 dread'."⁴³ If one considers the anthropological findings with Otto's attitude, one will
 290 not think probable that a sign of possible transgression between the divine and the
 291 human spheres of existence should automatically be interpreted as the happy
 292 moment of divine mercy coming.

293 A telling example of the interpretation of the rainbow on the basis of Christian
 294 attitude might be a false etymology of word *kegyelet* used in the Eastern Hungarian
 295 dialect of the Székelys. An important dictionary of the nineteenth century connected
 296 it to a homophonic word meaning 'piety', it associated it with divine mercy
 297 (*kegyelem*), and as an illustration of the development of meaning it quoted the
 298 Bible.⁴⁴ The word *kegyelet* ('piety') was coined during the Hungarian language
 299 reform era, and the first known case its use in 1841.⁴⁵ The *kegyelet* ('rainbow') of
 300 the dialect, however, goes back to an ancient Finno-Ugric root *kégy*, which simply
 301 meant bow.

302 In this example, an extra-European pagan tradition was interpreted on the basis of
 303 the Bible, and this leads us back to Antiquity. The Bible advertises completely
 304 different ideas about the rainbow from those of the classical sources. After the Flood
 305 God makes a covenant with every living creature of the earth, and he gives the
 306 promise that he will not destroy the earth through flood any more. As a token of this
 307 covenant he set his bow in the cloud, which suggests that the rainbow was created
 308 after the Creation. But nature's rule should not have been changed after the
 309 Creation, and therefore rabbinic interpreters supposed that the rainbow was created

⁴³ Otto (1958, 32).

⁴⁴ Czuczor and Fogarasi (1850, vol. 5, 1378). For other examples of this false etymology see Horváth (1949, 56).

⁴⁵ Horváth (1949, 57).

310 in the last possible moment, i.e., in twilight time of the Creation's last day.⁴⁶ After
311 the Flood God says:

312 And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and
313 you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations:

314 I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between
315 me and the earth.

316 And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow
317 shall be seen in the cloud:

318 And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every
319 living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to
320 destroy all flesh.

321 And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may
322 remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of
323 all flesh that is upon the earth.⁴⁷

324 Ovid, as we saw, made the rainbow appear before the Flood, and it was a means
325 or the cause of inundation, while in *Genesis* it signals the end of the Flood. May this
326 be the reason why in the European tradition the rainbow is transposed after the rain?
327 (This seems to be true at least in the high-culture of Christian tradition, since in
328 folklore we met many examples of ideas similar to those that were typical both
329 outside Europe and in Classical Antiquity.) The rainbow has significance also in the
330 Bible: it makes God remember his covenant with all of the living creatures, and it
331 suggests to people that God remembers his promise. It is not explicitly stated that
332 the rainbow appears after rain, but that would be logical, since it is the moment after
333 the Flood. Seeing a rainbow one can be happy with all his heart, since it is the sign
334 of divine mercy. The rain has stopped, i.e., no Flood came, since God promised not
335 to send such a Flood any more. Theoretically a rainbow would also be possible
336 before rain, when God collects the clouds and signals with a rainbow that it is going
337 to rain, but no Flood is coming.

338 The rainbow signals God's unlimited power at once; it reminds us that he could
339 send a Flood. If he does not, it is due to his mercy and his previous promise. The
340 rainbow reminds one not only of God's mercy, but also of God's anger and almighty
341 power. In the list of the pompous phenomena of the sky the *Ecclesiasticus* puts it
342 after the Sun, the Moon and the stars, but before the tempest, the lightning, the
343 hailstorm and the thunder.⁴⁸ *Revelation* makes it appear among the signs of God's
344 tremendous power too:

345 And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a
346 cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun,
347 and his feet as pillars of fire: And he had in his hand a little book open: and he
348 set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth, and cried with a

⁴⁶ *Pesahim* 54 a.

⁴⁷ *Gen.* 9.12–16.

⁴⁸ 43.1–17.

349 loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders
350 uttered their voices.⁴⁹

351 Cloud, blinding light, pillars of fire, roar of a lion and thunders: such phenomena
352 are related to a rainbow.

353 It seems hardly surprising that it is not interpreted as something univocally
354 positive by the Rabbinic tradition either. I think it is enough to quote one story:

355 R. Shimeon b. Yohai prevented tribulations overtaking the world and therefore
356 no rainbows appeared to warn it of calamity. The prophet Elijah and R. Joshua
357 b. Levi met him and he refused to see R. Joshua, because a rainbow had been
358 seen in the latter's lifetime and he had been unable to avert the impending
359 calamity. Many other incidents connected with R. Shimeon ben Yohai's self-
360 consciousness are mentioned; also how he once said to a valley, "Be full of
361 gold" and the valley filled.⁵⁰

362 The rainbow protects the world, as it seems, but at once it apparently signals that
363 the world is being endangered. It is not only the sign of divine mercy, but it also
364 suggests that at the moment God is very much in the mood to destroy the world—he
365 only does not because he gave a promise not to. The rainbow reminds one also of
366 the human evilness. The virtue of the true ones protects the given generation, but the
367 rainbow indicates that it does not really deserve the protection.⁵¹

368 On the basis of these data it cannot be simply stated that the classical tradition of
369 the rainbow is wiped out or replaced by the Hebrew tradition. Something else must
370 have happened too. It was Christianity that developed a new interpretation.

371 St. Augustine emphasised at two different places how important the repeated use
372 of the word *medius* is in God's speech to Noah.⁵² St. Augustine offers linguistic text
373 interpretation in both places. One cannot find the word *medius* in the *Vulgata* version
374 of the *Bible*; Augustine actually made use of a common Hebraism of the
375 *Septuaginta*, which was literally translated in the early Latin versions he read and
376 which were called *Itala*. Be that as it may, he thinks the word *medius* appears when
377 things should be united or reconciled without any residue of difference,⁵³ and he
378 finds the best example of such in the creation of rainbow, which connects God and
379 all the living creatures, the heaven and the earth.

380 It might be on this insight that Avitus based his typological interpretation of the
381 rainbow in his biblical epic *De spiritualis historiae gestis*. Two features seem to be
382 highlighted here; on the one hand, the central position, i.e., the mediating function it
383 has between heaven and earth, and on the other hand, the peculiarity that it can

⁴⁹ 10.1–3.

⁵⁰ Gaster (1924, 98–99).

⁵¹ *Ketubof* 77 b.

⁵² Item cum loqueretur ad Noe de arcu in nubibus ad signum constituendum hoc uerbum saepissime repetit (Enarrationes in Psalmos 67.19); hoc signum testamenti quod ego ponam inter medium meum et uestrum: quod est, inter me et uos. (Locutiones in Heptateuchum 29).

⁵³ Saepe hoc uerbum ad aliqua connectenda atque pacanda, ne inter se dissideant, poni solet; sicut testamentum inter se et populum deo constituyente, hoc uerbum scriptura ponit; nam pro eo quod est in Latino: inter me et uos, Graecus habet: inter medium meum et uestrum (Enarrationes in Psalmos 67.19).



384 combine in itself such theoretically incompatible elements as light and water.
 385 Therefore, the rainbow can mean Jesus, the mediator, who unifies human and divine
 386 natures. In the following passage it is not easy to understand who shows what, or
 387 what shows whom.

388 Et medius quidam mediator in aethere celso
 389 munere multimodo uarius, sed fulgidus omni
 390 uitalem monstrat sacrati pigneris arcum.
 391 (IV. 645–47)

392 In the previous sentences the subject was Jesus, and it is logical that it is him who
 393 “shows the vital rainbow of sacred gage;” and in this context it fits perfectly that he
 394 is “a central mediator in the sublime heaven.” But in this case it must be also him
 395 who “is shining with various but equally splendid colours.” This description,
 396 however, fits much better to a rainbow. If that is said of the rainbow, it must be the
 397 subject of the whole sentence, and “a central mediator in the sublime heaven” can
 398 be a rainbow, no doubt. But the rainbow cannot show the rainbow. Or can it? The
 399 rainbow shows or foretells perhaps another rainbow, the token of another sacred
 400 covenant, or to take another meaning of the word *pignus*, the “living rainbow of the
 401 sacred child.” In any interpretation of the sentence the rainbow is Jesus, and Jesus is
 402 a rainbow.

403 This is, however, not an individual game of typology, a unique symbolic
 404 interpretation of one Christian poet. The Christian exegesis follows this way of
 405 interpretation, which might be clearly demonstrated with the texts of Gregory the
 406 Great. He thought that a rainbow at once contains water and fire due to its blue and
 407 red colours. One should not be surprised that according to Gregory the rainbow
 408 consists of two colours only. The seven colours of the spectrum do not seem to have
 409 been able to be distinguished in a rainbow before the development of modern optics.
 410 Without that scientific background people did not theoretically know that seven
 411 colours could be distinguished in the phenomenon, and therefore they did not see
 412 them. The most usual number of colours is both among primitive and developed
 413 nations is three,⁵⁴ but Gregory’s two-coloured rainbow is not rare either. The double
 414 colour has double significance for him. The rainbow signifies both forms of divine
 415 vengeance, i.e., the past Flood and the future Fire of the last judgement (which
 416 interpretation follows the Old Testament tradition), but it also signals the divine
 417 mercy, i.e., the action of the water and the fiery Holy Spirit in baptism. The latter
 418 interpretation attaches the rainbow directly to the person of Jesus Christ—the
 419 *Mediator* as Gregory called him—, who has brought baptism to the remission of
 420 sins. The heavenly sign that unifies the colours of water and fire could start
 421 signifying mercy, reconciliation, and the promise of salvation. That sign also
 422 reminds one of Christ’s incarnation, which was also emphasised by Gregory. The
 423 verse of Ezekiel he was commenting here says⁵⁵ on a rainy day a rainbow can be
 424 seen on or in the clouds; according to Gregory’s explanation one should interpret

⁵⁴ Renel (1902, 60–61).

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 1,28: uelut aspectum arcus cum fuerit in nube in die pluuiae hic erat aspectus splendoris per gyrum.

425 that cloud as Christ's body.⁵⁶ The sign of reconciliation, the promise of salvation is
426 situated in the body of Jesus Christ.

427 With this interpretation we have reached the uplifting experience without any
428 uncomfortable association that the rainbow offers to European people. From that
429 moment on one could take mere delight from the beautiful heavenly phenomenon. It
430 just cannot foretell a storm; from that time a rainbow can appear only after the rain.
431 Many of the Christian ideas associated with the rainbow can be regarded
432 interpretations or re-interpretations of the Hebrew tradition. I do not think,
433 however, that the central and probably most important idea of mediation can be
434 found in the biblical tradition, while it also had a central position among the ideas
435 associated with the rainbow in Classical Antiquity. The messenger of the gods, the
436 rainbow that connects sky and earth (and also the Underworld) was, of course,
437 basically re-interpreted in Christianity; but it seems this mediating function re-
438 interpreted the biblical tradition as well.
439

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⁵⁶ Gregorius Magnus: Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam 8: Et post Mediatoris aduentum, eo uirtus sancti spiritus in humano genere claruit, quo electos Dei et aqua baptismatis lauit et igni diuini amoris incendit. Quasi enim admixto colore aquae simul et ignis quidam arcus in nube ad propitiationem ponitur, cum Veritas dicit: „nisi qui renatus fuerit ex aqua et Spiritu sancto, non potest introire in regnum Dei. Qui arcus in nube est in die pluuiae, quia in dominica incarnatione, in effusione praedicationis ostenditur, ut ad ueniam corda credentium, Deo parcente, reuocentur. Nubem enim redemptoris carnem non inconuenienter accipimus.

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