

HAM'S SIN AND THE CURSE ON CANAAN – GENESIS 9:18-27

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Genesis 9:18-27 states (ESV):

¹⁸ The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹ These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. ²⁰ Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. ²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. ²³ Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." ²⁶ He also said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant."

The meaning of this text has been debated for millennia. We are told that Noah was drunk and lying uncovered in his (or possibly her, his wife's)¹ tent. Noah's youngest son, Ham, "saw the nakedness of his father" and reported that event to his two brothers who were outside. In contrast to Ham, Shem and Japheth "took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness." After Noah awoke, he learned what Ham "had done to him" and cursed Ham's son Canaan as a result.

The first question is the nature of Ham's offense. Many accept the description literally and conclude that seeing one's father naked, whether voyeuristically or even inadvertently, was a serious offense against his dignity and thus subject to punishment. But such passive conduct does not fit very comfortably with the indication that Ham had *done something to* Noah, and as John Bergsma and Scott Hahn point out:

The strength of this position is its conservatism: it refuses to see anything in the text that is not explicit. Yet, in a sense, voyeurism is a nonexplanation, since it fails to elucidate either the gravity of Ham's offense or the reason for the curse of

¹ John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/1 (2005), 38 (fn. 55) state:

It is suggestive that the consonantal form אִהֵל appears to have the feminine possessive suffix (see Cohen, *Drunkness*, 8, and *Gen. Rab.* 36:7; although the MT points the word according to the *qêrê'* אִהֵל, "his tent"). Cohen, Kikawada and Quinn (*Before Abraham Was*, 102), and the rabbinic sages suggest it is the tent of Noah's wife. The feminine form אִהֵל also occurs, for example, in Gen 24:67, where Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother to consummate their marriage. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine whether the form אִהֵל in v. 21 is intentionally feminine, or an example of archaic orthography for the masculine pronominal suffix (see Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2:161).

Canaan. It also requires the interpreter to assume the existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent that is otherwise unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature. Donald J. Wold remarks, "Scholars who accept the literal view... must defend a custom about which we know nothing."²

Ancient rabbis concluded that Ham castrated Noah. This, in their view, explained why Noah cursed Ham's fourth son, Canaan. It was because Ham had deprived Noah of the ability to beget a fourth son. But there is no lexical hint in the text suggesting castration,³ and the sense of v. 24 is that Noah did not discover what Ham had done until sometime later, which seems very unlikely in the case of castration.

Others are convinced that Ham raped Noah (paternal incest). This view takes seriously the indication that Ham had *done something to* Noah and almost fits with the fact the phrase "to see the nakedness of his father" is an idiom for sexual intercourse. Leviticus 20:17 equates "to see nakedness" with "to uncover nakedness," and "to uncover nakedness" is the usual expression for sexual intercourse in the Holiness Code (e.g., Lev. 18:6). This suggests that more than a literal seeing is implied by the statement that Ham saw his father's nakedness.⁴ I say the view "almost" fits with the fact the phrase "to see the nakedness of his father" is an idiom for sexual intercourse because "in all the relevant texts, גלה/ראה ערוה ["to uncover/see nakedness"] is associated with heterosexual activity" not homosexual activity.⁵

Proponents of the paternal-incest view allege that Ham's motivation for humiliating his father by raping him was to usurp his father's authority and elevate himself over his brothers in the family hierarchy, which is why he reported it to his brothers, but "there is no precedent in biblical or ancient Near Eastern documents for paternal rape as a means of usurping a father's position."⁶ Another significant weakness of this view is that it provides no rationale for the cursing of Ham's son Canaan.

The fact the reported actions of Shem and Japheth in v. 23 clearly relate to Noah's literal nakedness does not demand that Ham's "seeing" Noah's nakedness in v. 22 also be taken literally (as voyeurism) rather than idiomatically (as intercourse). As Robert Gagnon explains:

The brothers' actions in "covering their father's nakedness" and taking great pains not to look at their father is compatible with an interpretation of "seeing another's nakedness" as sexual intercourse. The brothers' actions play on the broader meaning of the phrase. Not only did the brothers not "see their father's nakedness" in the sense of having intercourse with him, but also they did not even dare to "see their father's nakedness" in a literal sense. Where Ham's act was exceedingly evil, their gesture was exceedingly pious and noble.⁷

² Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 27.

³ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 27-28.

⁴ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 29.

⁵ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 34.

⁶ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 37.

⁷ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 67 (quoted in Bergsma and Hahn [2005], 33).

With Bergsma and Hahn, I think the most likely meaning of this text is that Ham had sexual relations with Noah's wife (maternal incest), who presumably was his mother, and that Canaan was conceived in that sinful union. The starting point for this understanding is that the phrase "saw the nakedness of his father" (Gen. 9:22) is best understood as an idiom for "had sexual relations with his father's wife." Bergsma and Hahn explain:

We begin with the idiomatic meaning of the phrase ראה ערוה אב, "to see the father's nakedness" (v. 22). Proponents of the theory of paternal incest are correct to equate ראה ערוה ["to see nakedness"] with גלה ארוה, "to uncover nakedness" via Lev 20:17, understanding both as euphemisms for sexual intercourse. However, one may take this valid insight one step further by recognizing that in all the relevant texts, גלה/ראה ערוה ["to uncover/see nakedness"] is associated with heterosexual activity, and "the nakedness of the father" (ערוה אב) actually refers to the mother's nakedness. For example, in Lev 18:7-8, the "nakedness of your father" is defined as "the nakedness of your mother" [Hebrew text omitted]:

⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father.

Likewise, Lev 18:14, 16; 20:11, 30, 21 all describe a woman's nakedness as the nakedness of her husband. The same logic is at work in Deut 23:1 and 27:20, which describe intercourse with one's father's wife as "uncovering the father's skirt" (גלה כנף אביו).

On the contrary, the two verses in the Pentateuch that condemn homosexual relations (Lev 18:22 and 20:13) use the verb שכב, not גלה/ראה ערוה as in Gen 9:21-23. No combination of the terms, ערו, ראה, and/or גלה is found associated with homosexual relations anywhere in the Bible.

Therefore, the phrase ראה ערוה אב in Gen 9:22 is a euphemism for sexual intercourse indeed, but heterosexual rather than homosexual intercourse. If we take full account of the nuance of the biblical idiom, the statement that Ham "saw his father's nakedness" implies relations with Noah's wife, presumably Ham's mother.⁸

As for Ham's motivation, though "there is no precedent in biblical or ancient Near Eastern documents for paternal rape as a means of usurping a father's position . . . there is abundant attestation of sleeping with one's father's *wives* as a means of usurpation."⁹ Absalom's conduct with David's concubines is a case in point (2 Sam 15:20-23). Ham presumably intended to usurp his father's authority and elevate himself over his brothers in the family hierarchy, which is why he reported his conduct to his brothers.

As noted above, this all may have occurred in the tent of Noah's wife rather than his own tent. Bergsma and Hahn offer the following reading of the text:

⁸ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 34-35.

⁹ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 37.

Noah becomes drunk and disrobes in "her tent" (אהלה) in preparation for intercourse but is incapacitated by his drunkenness (v. 21). Ham enters and "sees his father's nakedness," that is, engages in relations with his father's wife (v. 22a). He exits and informs his brothers of his grasp at familial power (v. 22b), perhaps producing an article of clothing as proof of his claim. The brothers, in turn, act with excessive filial deference and piety in returning "the garment" (השמלה) to their humiliated father, avoiding not only the figurative "seeing of the father's nakedness" (i.e., maternal incest) but the literal as well. In the aftermath of the event, Noah curses the product of Ham's illicit union, namely, Canaan, and blesses Shem and Japheth for their piety.¹⁰

Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan with a declaration that his descendants would be servants of the descendants of Shem and Japheth. Perhaps Noah believed that God's prior blessing on his sons (Gen. 9:1) precluded him from cursing Ham, so he punished Ham by declaring that some of his descendants would bear consequences of his sin. As F. B. Huey, Jr. notes, "It is theologically essential to maintain a distinction between being punished for another's sins and experiencing the evil consequences of that person's sins."¹¹ If, for example, husband and wife murderers were banished to a remote island as punishment for their crime, the children born to them on that island would live there as a *consequence* of their parents' crime but not as *punishment* for it. When God "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" (Ex. 20:5, 34:7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9), the hardship they bear is not *punishment* of them. The guilt of the fathers is not charged against the children (e.g., Ezek. 18:20). Rather, they suffer as instruments of God's punishment of the rebellious fathers. Yes, they suffer, but not as objects of divine wrath, and that is significant. I think Noah's curse on Ham's progeny functions similarly. Ham is punished in learning what his sinful behavior has brought on his descendants.

This understanding also sheds light on the repeated references to Ham as the father of Canaan. Bergsma and Hahn observe:

Ham is repeatedly, and apparently superfluously, identified as "the father of Canaan" (vv. 18 and 20) because the narrator wishes to signal the reader that this narrative explains how Ham became "the father of Canaan." Van Wolde remarks:

The text opens . . . 'Ham was the father of Canaan' (9.18). It is striking that Ham is named father at the precise moment when he is introduced as a son. Later, at the transgression of Ham, exactly the same thing happens: "Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father' (9.22). It sounds rather stupid. . . . Evidently the text wants to put all the emphasis on the fatherhood of Ham or, rather, on the fact that he is the father of Canaan.

The repetition is not stupid, however, if the pericope is explaining how Ham fathered Canaan.¹²

¹⁰ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 38-39.

¹¹ F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 486.

¹² Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 35.

After Noah awoke from his alcohol-induced slumber, he learned¹³ what Ham had done, presumably from his wife. And Noah said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." The text does not demand that Noah pronounced the curse upon learning of Ham's sin,¹⁴ so Moses may have compressed the chronology, reporting a curse that was given later in connection with the sin that precipitated it. If Noah did pronounce the curse upon learning of Ham's deed, it would have been with divinely given foreknowledge of Canaan's conception, birth, and future. As Andrew Steinmann observes, "[I]t ought to be noticed that Noah's curse and his blessings (vv. 26-27) are prophetic, and this curse directs the reader forward to the promise of the subjugation of the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants."¹⁵

Bergsma and Hahn conclude their study this way:

In the review of the various interpretive options for Gen 9:20-27 above, it has been seen that the voyeurist position, which understands Ham's deed as nothing more than looking, fails to explain the gravity of Ham's sin or the cursing of Canaan. The castration view suffers from a lack of textual support. The currently popular paternal-incest interpretation has much to commend it, but in almost every case the evidence marshaled for this view actually better suits the maternal-incest theory. The heuristic strengths of the maternal-incest interpretation are manifold: it explains (1) the gravity of Ham's sin, (2) the rationale for the cursing of Canaan rather than Ham, (3) Ham's motivation for committing his offense, (4) the repetition of "Ham, the father of Canaan," and (5) the sexually charged language of the passage. In addition, biblical and ancient Near Eastern analogues for Ham's crime are easy to find, and the related passages of the Pentateuch fit together more elegantly on this interpretation.¹⁶

¹³ E.g., REB, NAB, NEB, NJB, NIV ("found out"), HCSB, CSB, and NET.

¹⁴ Verse 25 (and v. 24) begins with a common conjunction (*wə*) that can simply mean "And" (e.g., KJV, ERV, ASV, LEB).

¹⁵ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 116.

¹⁶ Bergsma and Hahn (2005), 40.