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Cursed be Canaan the Lowest of Slaves Will He Be to His Brothers

9: 20-27

Cursed be Canaan the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers DIG: From this story, what is your impression of Noah? Of his sons? How does this compare with the image presented in 6:8-10? What do these contrasting images imply about children respecting parents? About righteousness? Does being righteous mean sinless? What does Noah's prophetic curse mean for his three sons? What does it mean for the Jewish people who are descendants of Shem?

REFLECT: Noah came off a mountaintop experience with ADONAI and was abused. Have you ever experienced an attack after a great experience with God? How did you deal with it? Do you feel it is right for God to punish, even a generational sin? How confident are you that the LORD is good and will be fair in His dealings with mankind? Did this curse mean that individual Canaanites could still repent and worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Why or why not?

This section is about the nature and destiny of the descendants of **Canaan, the Canaanites**, who would continue to be the enemy of **the LORD's** chosen people, **Isra'el**. There was a new beginning and a new world, but the same old **sin** was still there. As we read it, our hearts are full of disappointment. And if that is how we feel, think of what **ADONAI** must have felt! As **God** afterwards said about **Isra'el**: **What more could have been done for My vineyard than I have done for it** (see the commentary on **Isaiah, to see link click Ba - The Song of the Vineyard**)? As we read this section, we should be careful to apply it to ourselves. How do we deal with an attack from the Adversary?¹⁶⁹

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard (9:20). *A believer often finds small temptations the most dangerous.* **When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk (9:21a).** Adam fell when he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**3:6**); **Noah** fell when **he** drank the fruit of the vine.



His action is neither condemned nor approved of, but no one can fail to see that this first mention of **wine** in the Bible points to its potentially destructive effects. The Scriptures do not condemn drinking **wine (Judges 9:13; Psalm 104:15; 1 Timothy 5:23)**, but it does say that **drunkenness** is a **sin (Prov 20:1, 23:20; Eph 5:18)**. **Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, even though he walked with God for 600 years (6:9)**.

Each of us is dependent on **God's grace**, for even in our highest moments of faith we also have low moments when we yield to temptation. *A believer is never immune from sin.* At those low moments **the LORD** offers us **the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:7)**.¹⁷⁰ *And a believer is always subject to experiencing entirely new temptations.* As we live our lives, evil often takes entirely new forms. We can have a special weakness in our youth that we fight against for years and years, only to find another weakness and **sinfulness** breaking out in our more mature years.

But why did **God** record the **sin** against **Noah**? If a man had written **Genesis**, he would have either covered up the **sin**, or not mention it at all. But **ADONAI** recorded it for **His** own purposes. First of all, **He** did it to encourage the children of **Isra'el** when they entered the land of **Canaan** during the time of Moses. They remembered that **the LORD** had placed a curse on **Canaan**. **He** had pronounced **His** judgment upon the race. All you have to do is read the rest of the TaNaKh and secular history to discover the fulfillment of this judgment. **The Canaanites** have disappeared. Secondly, it was written to let you and I know something about the weakness of the flesh: **For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4)**. So this story, however shameful, gives us **hope**. Since **Noah was a righteous man** who walked with **God**, and even though **he** was wronged, maybe there is **hope** for us also when we are wronged.

Noah drank some of the wine, got drunk, and was uncovered in his tent. Then Ham, Canaan's father, saw his father's private parts (9:21-22b). Here, Moshe tells us the story of how it came to be that **the Canaanites** were subjugated by **the Israelites**. What was **Ham's** horrible crime? Were **the Canaanites** **enslaved** merely because **Ham saw his father's private parts**? It think not. The **curse** resulted from **Ham's** incestuous, homosexual rape of **his father**. There are six reasons for this conclusion.

First, the act took place inside **Noah's tent**. What was **Ham** doing inside **his father's tent**? Possibly **the tent** was understood to be off-limits to **the sons**, explaining why **Shem** and **Japheth** were **outside** and unaware. **The cloak** was **Noah's**, why was it **outside the tent**?¹⁷¹ **Ham** brought it with **him** when **he** came **outside the tent**. But why would **he** bring **his father's cloak outside**? You would think that would be the last thing he would want to do! It was the evidence **he** needed to establish the dominance of **his** lineage over that of **his** brothers.

Second, **when Noah woke up from his wine, he learned what his youngest son had "done to him" (9:24)** - not the expression one would expect to describe an unintended glance or even voyeurism.¹⁷² The Bible says that **Noah was uncovered in his tent (Genesis 9:21)**. **Noah** was **drunk** and passed out. Who **uncovered him**? The continuation in **9:22a, then Ham, Canaan's father, saw his father's private parts** (which need not be separated from **9:21** with a period) intimates that **Ham** committed the unspeakable act.

Third, and very important, the language of **uncovering** and **seeing the nakedness of** connects with similar phrases referring to sexual intercourse. **Leviticus** uses the phrase **uncover the nakedness of** to point to incest (**Leviticus 18:6-18, 20:11** and **17-21**). In **Leviticus 18:19** the same phrase is used of sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual cycle. The same phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible of prostitution and adultery, and of rape and/or public exposure for adultery (**Ezekiel 22:10; Deuteronomy 22:30**). In **Leviticus 20:17**, the expression **sees his/her nakedness** is used to describe sibling incest; in other instances, the phrase **seeing the nakedness of** merely implies an opportunity for rape.

Fourth, the claim that the text is concerned with **Ham's** homosexual rape of his father is bolstered by the depiction of homosexual rape in a Mesopotamian omen text and the Egyptian myth of Horus and Seth; in other words, as attempts at emasculating, disgracing, and demonstrating one's power over a rival. By raping **his father**, taking **his** cloak **outside** and **telling his brothers** of the act (**9:22b**), **Ham** was attempting to establish **his** right to succeed **his father** as patriarch.

Fifth, the brothers' actions in **covering their father's nakedness** and taking great pains not to look at him is compatible with an interpretation of **seeing their fathers' nakedness** as sexual intercourse. **So, Shem and Japheth took the cloak and laid it over both their shoulders and walked backwards and with it covered their father's private parts. But their faces were turned away,**

so they did not see their father's private parts (9:23). The brother's actions play on the broader meaning of the phrase. Not only did **the brothers** not **see their father's nakedness** in the sense of not having sex 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.

Sixth, and possibly the most important, understanding **Ham's** action as incestuous, homosexual rape of **his father** explains the severity of **the curse on Canaan**. According to **Leviticus 18:24-30, 20:22-26**, the reason **God** decided to vomit out **the Canaanites** from the Land was **their** participation in such **abominable practices** as incest and homosexual intercourse, which is singled out for special attention as an **abominable practice**.

The thrust of **Genesis 9:20-27** can be seen in the fact that **the Canaanites** deserved to be driven from the Land and made **slaves** because **they** were, and had always been, avid masters of immoral activity. Therefore, the punishment fit the crime. Just as **Ham** committed a heinous act with **his** seed (sperm), so too **the curse** fell on **his** seed (son, descendants).¹⁷³ The fact that a divine curse was placed on **Ham's** lineage, leaves no doubt that **God** considers homosexuality a **wicked perversion (Leviticus 18:17 and 23)**.



As a result, **Noah** said: **Cursed be Canaan (9:25a)!** There was a **curse** associated with both Adam and **Noah**. Because of **Adam, the ground** was **cursed (3:17-19)** and **Noah** **cursed Canaan**. These next few verses are the only recorded words of **Noah** anywhere in the TaNaKh. **Canaan** is focused on because **he** developed **Ham's** negative characteristics. **Like father like son**. History tells us that the immorality of **the Canaanites** became great (**Genesis 15:16, 18:20-21, 19:4-10; Leviticus 18:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-31**).

We observe immediately that **Noah's** prophecy cannot be used to justify **the**

enslavement of blacks by whites (Some have argued wrongly that certain ethnic groups are superior to others. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan have based their racist beliefs on this passage, and have even argued that **slavery** is **God's** plan for inferior races). As far as we know, **Noah's** three **sons** were Caucasian. But even though some have argued that **Ham** was ultimately the father of the black race, **Noah** did not curse **Ham** but **Canaan**, *and the Canaanites were definitely Caucasian*. Historically, various peoples, including the Jews under **Joshua**, conquered **the Canaanites**. This is doubtless the main intent of **Noah's** prophecy.¹⁷⁴

But why was **Canaan** cursed instead of **Ham**? **Ham's** actions could not be left without repercussions. There are three principles involved. First, **children** are punished **for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God (Exodus 20:5, 34:6-7)**. Secondly, **do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please the sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction (Galatians 6:8-9a)**. **Ham sinned as a son, so he was punished through his son**. Thirdly, the mercy of **the LORD** is shown. **The sin of Ham** was punished in only one of **his sons**, not all four. **The sin of Ham** came to life in **Canaan** and **the Canaanites**, and they acted as their ancestor did.

The result of the curse on **Canaan** was that **he** would become **the lowest of slaves to his brothers (9:25b)**, but this was because the descendants of **Canaan** lived degrading lives like **Ham**, not because of what **Ham** did. The point is that nationally, at least, **drunken** debauchery **enslaves** people. That is why, in **ADONAI's** program to bless **Isra'el**, the **Canaanites** were condemned. They were to be judged by **God** through defeat in battles as seen in **Joshua** because their actions were in the same pattern and mold as their ancestor **Ham**.¹⁷⁵

The Canaanites became servants to the Jews; the Phoenicians, who were **the Canaanites**, became servants to the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Carthage marks the final end of **the Canaanites** and the Roman destruction of Carthage brought **the Canaanite** history to an end in 146 BC. *But Noah's words seem to be more of a general than a specific prophecy*, that the line of **Shem** will be blessed and the line of **Ham** in **Canaan** will be **cursed**.¹⁷⁶

He also said: **Blessed be ADONAI, the God of Shem! So** it was **the God of Shem** who was blessed and not **Shem himself**. **Shem** will uniquely possess the knowledge of **ADONAI**. Adam had three sons and it was through Seth that **the**

Seed of the woman (3:15), or the **Messiah**, would come; **Noah** had three sons, and it was in **Shem** that the messianic line was established. Therefore, **the Seed of the woman** will come through **Shem** and not through **Ham** or **Japheth**. **Messiah** belonged to the race of **Shem** and Semites first spread **God's Word**. But then came the curse: **May Canaan be the slave of Shem (9:26)!**

May God extend the territory of Japheth. This prophecy came true because the descendants of **Japheth** extended across Asia and Europe.

May Japheth live in, or dwell in, or have fellowship with, the tents of Shem. We know that in the big picture, believing Gentiles have superseded the Jews in spiritual blessings today. The descendants of **Japheth**, more than the descendants of **Ham**, adopted **the God of Shem**. **The rabbis believe this verse teaches that the Torah would be translated into Greek and the beauty of Japheth, because the Hebrew word for Japheth means beauty in the Greek language.**

Then comes **the curse, "And may Canaan be his slave" (9:27)**. The descendants of **Canaan** would be **the slaves** of the descendants of **Japheth**. The fulfillment would be that the Phoenicians, or **Canaanites**, would become **slaves** to the Greeks and the Romans. Thus, these verses are the basis for **Isra'el's** foreign policy in the land (**Deuteronomy 20:16-18**).

A pattern begins in these verses and is repeated in the Torah. The pattern is that we see **a father** pronouncing a **blessing/curse** over **his children**. We see **Noah** doing so in this passage and we will see **Jacob** doing the same for **his sons**, and **Moshe**, as a spiritual **father**, will also do the same for **his spiritual children, Isra'el**.