

The Curse of Canaan

Key Passage: Genesis 9:20-27; II Samuel 5:4-10

Note: as you come to this study pause a moment and pray that the Lord would restrain your imagination. You need protected from the pollution that this story of Canaanite sin contains. Pray that by the power of God we might be as Christ Himself who sat and conversed with sinners yet was not tainted with their sin.

Introduction

When Noah stepped off the ark it was a whole new world of fresh opportunities. Like the old world however the ravages of sin were soon felt and felt very bitterly, because it demanded another curse. The old man Noah, formerly known as a “preacher of righteousness” became the catalysts for immorality and division in his family. Ham, his “little son” had been preserved in the flood by the grace of God but, as Bishop Hall says, “the ark had nourished a monster.”

At 600 years old Noah makes another career change. He had been an engineer and ship builder for 120 years and now that line of work has dried up and he “began to be a man of the soil.” It was commonly believed that Noah invented wine at this time in his discovery he was inadvertently overcome by its intoxicating potency.¹ Whether Noah invented the stuff or not is inconsequential to the present discussion. It is most likely that Noah returned to what he had previously worked at.² But now in his old age he misuses his wine. Drunkenness prepared the way for sin and in his drunken stupor Noah “uncovered himself” and left an avenue open for the sin of others around him. There is no doubt that Noah sinned in this and the Holy Spirit would instruct us by it. But the sin of Noah is not the focus of the passage. Indeed it appears that Moses records Noah’s sin more of necessary to set the scene.

The theme of the paragraph is the sin of Ham and the subsequent prophecies of Noah. This passage however, contains a number of problems. The first one is what sin did Ham commit? Another problem is why was Canaan cursed and not Ham and a final problem we will consider here is what in fact was the curse placed on Canaan?

The Sin Of Ham

Many have debated what Ham’s sin was, whether it was an accidental look at his father’s nakedness³ or perhaps a disrespectful gaze and later mockery.⁴ Some have suggested also that Ham had an incestuous relationship with his mother when Noah was drunk, and that Canaan was cursed because he was the fruit of that union.⁵ Some of the Rabbis taught that Ham castrated his father to prevent him from having more children so that he could seize power over the family.⁶

Modesty is important to the Lord (Exodus 20:26) and it was important also to the Patriarchs coming as they did so close to the disgrace of nakedness in Eden. There are a number of major difficulties with the theory of incest⁷ and it is hard to conceive that God pronounced a curse of such magnitude because Ham

¹ Alan P. Ross, *Studies in the Book of Genesis Part 1: The Curse of Canaan* in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 137:547, 228.

² E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, trans. Theodore Meyer, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 30

³ Thomas O. Figart, cited in Ross, Alan P., *Studies in the Book of Genesis Part 1: The Curse of Canaan* in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 137:547, 230.

⁴ Alan Ross (*Ibid*) suggests that Ham was disrespectful. He states that the Israelites would have agreed with the Ugaritic literature which states that a son should take his father by the hand when he is drunk. Thomas Adams’s English Puritan suggests that Ham was cursed for slander. He writes “Ham was cursed for declaring his father’s sin, though true,” Thomas Adams *The Work of Thomas Adams*, (Eureka, CA: Tanski Publications), 1:187. See also Bp. Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old And New Testaments*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, n.d.), 12.

⁵ F. W. Bassett, cited in Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 73.

⁶ Alan P. Ross, *Studies in the Book of Genesis Part 1: The Curse of Canaan* in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 137:547, 231.

⁷ See Hamilton, Victor, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 73. First, the story presupposes that Canaan was born *before* the episode. Second, the story suggests that the curse was made immediately after the incident, rather than the period of time to hear of his wife’s pregnancy or the birth of the child.

'saw' his father naked, even with the extended sin of disrespect and supposed slander. Henry Morris suggests that there was no actual sin, but Canaan was cursed on the basis of what Noah saw in his character through his prophetic vision.⁸ I believe Henry Morris is correct, only he does not go far enough. The text suggests something more sinister, i.e. there was actual sin involved. The writer is keen to point out that Ham committed actual sin. He "did" something and there is every indication that this was more than a look. There are a number of indications that might bring us to this conclusion.

First, let us consider the phrase, "*Ham the father of Canaan*" where, I believe, Moses links the sins of the Canaanites to the sin of Ham. Notice the wording of verse 22 in the context in which it was written. Why would Moses put it like this, "*Ham the father of Canaan*" and why is Canaan singled out above his other brothers? Canaan (and the Canaanites) was renowned for his sin. Moses is writing for the Israelites who are about to enter into a land filled with the most heinous sexual perversion, the "*Land of Canaan.*" They would be aware then of the history of Canaan. They would also be aware of the sins of Sodom (Canaanite) and the fact that their distant relative, Lot's wife, was turned into a pillar of salt on the plains of Sodom. They also knew that the Moabites and the Ammonites were the fruit of an incestuous relationship. They have all of this history in their mind along with the command of God to "*utterly overthrow them* [the "*Canaanites*]" (Exodus 23:24) and "*thine eye shall have no pity upon them*" (Deuteronomy 7:16). And so when Moses says, "*Ham, the father of Canaan,*" to the informed mind of an Israelite he is in effect saying "*Ham the father of all of this sin.*" In other words, given the nature of the sins of the Canaanites we have an indication of what we may expect from their father. Alan Ross writes;⁹

"To the Hebrew mind, the Canaanites were the most natural embodiment of Ham. Everything they did in their pagan existence was symbolized in the attitude of Ham. From the moment the patriarchs entered the land, these tribes were there with their corrupting influence (Gen 13:18; 15:16; 18:32; 19; 38). The Torah warned the people of the Exodus about the wickedness of the Canaanites in terms that call to mind the violation of Ham (Lev 18:2-6). There follows a lengthy listing of such vile practices of the Canaanites (18:7-23) that the text must employ euphemisms to represent their deeds ("*nakedness*" alone is used twenty-four times). Because of these sins the Canaanites were defiled and were to be driven out before the Israelites."

Second, consider phrase "*Saw the nakedness of his father.*" The word "saw" here means to see with the eyes in its most basic use. It has however a wide range of nuances; "*The extended and metaphorical senses in the Qal* [the verb theme used in our text] include to regard, perceive, feel, understand, learn, enjoy."¹⁰ In Isaiah 44:16 ("*I am warm, I have seen the fire*") is it used to speak of enjoyment and it is in this way that it is used of David in 2 Samuel 11:2¹¹ and also in Obadiah 11-12 (*gloat over*) and Genesis 3:6 ("*saw that the tree was good...pleasant...to be desired*"). Furthermore, this verb is used as a euphemism throughout the Old Testament to refer to a sexual relationship (Leviticus 20:17; see also verses 18-19).

Third, consider the line that states Noah "*knew what his younger son had done to him.*" The text indicates that Noah was 'conscience' that something "[was] done" to him – the text says that he "*knew* what his younger son *had done* to him" (Vs. 24 emphasis added). The theme in the Hebrew grammar indicates that he "perceived (by experience). The NIV translates this "*when Noah found out*" (emphasis added) but if the writer wanted to show that Noah "*found out*" (or was instructed) some time after the fact, he could have used another Hebrew verb theme (Niphal – passive or reflexive theme) which would make it more clear.

Third, this theory fails to provide a rationale for the actions of Shem and Japheth going in to cover their father's nakedness.

⁸ Henry M. Morris, *Biblical Creationism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 43.

⁹ Alan P. Ross, *Studies in the Book of Genesis Part 1: The Curse of Canaan* in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 137:547, 234.

¹⁰ Bruce Walke, Laird Harris, Gleason Archer; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:823.

¹¹ Henry Smith, *The Works of Henry Smith*, (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2002), 1:306. "Here are two sins which go before Ham's curse: one, that he did see his father's nakedness; the other, that he did reveal it unto his brethren...When he saith that 'Ham saw his Father's nakedness,' he meaneth that he looked upon it with pleasure, as David did upon the nakedness of Bathsheba."

It seems more likely that Ham “discovered his father in a state of drunkenness and apparently initiated a homosexual relationship with him.”¹² At the very least Ham looked on his father and got some perverse gratification—if not in an actual physical encounter then in the fantasies of his mind. But Ham went further. He was not content to perversely enjoy his sin in private. We might say he came out of the closet and declared publicly the depravity of his mind. Luther said “He had committed many more sins against his father before this, but his corrupt nature and perverse mind reached their climax when he saw his father lying drunken and naked.”¹³

Canaan’s Curse: Why Canaan and Not Ham?

The next problem to deal with in the text is the fact that Canaan was cursed and Ham ‘escaped’. This of course assumed that Ham did ‘escape’? Any father who knows the pain of seeing the sins of the fathers on the children will immediately realise that Ham felt the curse on his sin. Ham suffered “punishment in kind” —as he hurt his father Noah, so Canaan would hurt him. Ham would suffer seeing a curse placed on his son, known as talionic justice (from the Latin talio meaning *retribution*).¹⁴ Bishop Joseph Hall writes, “because Ham sinned against his father, therefore he shall be plagued in his children.”¹⁵

We should not suppose that all the son of Ham were under this curse, but only Canaan and his sons.¹⁶ But why only Canaan and not his other brothers? There are a number of reasons suggested. Albert Barnes suggests perhaps he had some guilt in the sin with his grandfather. And others go further still and say that it was actually Canaan who committed the crime—it is not unusual for grandsons to be referred to as “sons”. If this was the case then it raises the question why was Ham not blessed with Shem and Japheth, if he was innocent.¹⁷ Justin Martyr writes that the Spirit of prophecy could not curse Ham because he had already been blessed along with his brothers.¹⁸ Calvin says, “the conjecture is futile”¹⁹

Perhaps there is another explanation—if Ham did not find physical gratification, perhaps Noah, by the spirit of prophecy discovered in him an attraction to his naked father. Noah then saw the same sins coming to fruition in his son Canaan and his descendants. E. W. Hengstenberg writes; “He [Ham] is punished in *this* son, because he followed most decidedly the example of his father's impiety and wickedness.”²⁰

In the text there is an emphasis on Canaan throughout the entire story that we cannot overlook. Ham, the perpetrator is referred to as, “Ham, the father of Canaan,” and Canaan receives the curse directly and repeatedly (verses 25, 26 and 27). It seems clear however, that the curse was not so much on the person of Canaan as it applied to the wicked descendants of Canaan—the Canaanites. It is after all a prophecy just like the oracle to Shem and Japheth. “Noah could see in the characters of his three sons to predict the general characteristics of their descendants.”²¹ Lactantius, (*circa* 240–320) writes; ²²

¹² O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Critical Questions Concerning The “Curse Of Ham” (Gen 9:20-27)”, in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 41:2, 180

¹³ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 1:174.

¹⁴ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 34

¹⁵ Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old And New Testaments*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, n.d.), 13. See also Kidner, Hamilton, (74), Robertson, (181).

¹⁶ Many commentators think that the whole family of Ham received the curse. Calvin however asks, “why among the many sons of Ham, God chooses one to be smitten?” (Commentary, 1:306). See Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* 125.

¹⁷ Alan P. Ross, *Studies in the Book of Genesis Part 1: The Curse of Canaan* in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: 137:547, 230.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:268-269). This position seems to suggest that Ham shared in the salvation that the ark typified, but this is a false assumption.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1993), 1:306.

²⁰ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 34

²¹ Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on Prophecy*, (London: Longman & Co., 1832), 7. See also Henry M. Morris, *Biblical Creationism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 43.

²² Lactantius, “*The Divine Institutes*,” in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 7:63, n. 7.

“The curse was not uttered in a spirit of vengeance or impatience on account of the injury received, but by the divine impulse of the divine Spirit. The prophet fixes on the descendents of Ham, whose impiety was foreseen, and to whom it brought a curse so signal.”

It is evident also from the following history why Canaan is cursed and not Ham or his brothers. The Canaanites were a wickedly vile people whose sins included;

- **Worship of images:** Exodus 34:13-14 “*But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God*” cf. Psalm 106:34ff refers to the idols of Canaan also.
- **Body Mutilation:** Deuteronomy 14:1-2 “*...ye shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the dead...*” A Ugaritic text for a typical Canaanite grief ritual shows mutilation.
- **Incest:** In the Ugaritic literature there is the story of an incestuous El: cf. Leviticus 18:8ff.
- **Bestiality:** (Exodus 22:19/Leviticus 20:15/Deuteronomy 23:17,18; 18:1-12)
- **Sorcery and Divination:** Deuteronomy 18:10
- **Transvestite.** Deuteronomy 22:5.
- **Homosexuality:** Both in private life. It was also part of cultic practice (cf. 2 Kings 23:7)
- **Temple Prostitution:** A parallelism of the word ‘prostitute’ with ‘holy thing’ (cf. 1 Kings 15:12; II Kings 23:7). (See Hosea 4:14 & Genesis 38:15 cf.22).

Canaan’s Curse: What was the Curse?

Many older interpretations of this verse are based solely on the words “a servant of servants” and perhaps even based on current cultural norms. This led to a politico-ethnic interpretation, teaching that the curse of Canaan was on black Africans which was at that time seen in the African slave trade.²³ Thomas Goodwin, the English Puritan writer simply speaks of the curse of Canaan as a “*curse of rejection*” in the same vein as that of Esau.²⁴

It seems more realistic and more true to the biblical history to see the curse on Canaan fulfilled in the subduing of the Canaanites during the conquest under Joshua, David and Solomon, both of whom put Canaan’s descendants in forced service to Israel (Joshua 9:23; II Samuel 5:4-10; 1 Kings 9:20-21). Justin Martyr (AD 100 – 165) wrote to Trypho the Jew saying; “For you, who have derived your lineage from Shem, invaded the territory of the sons of Canaan by the will of God and you possessed it.”²⁵

All of this brings us to consider again the setting and time of writing. It also provides us with a deeper understanding of the history of Israel in the “Promised Land” and their interaction with the Canaanites and Philistines. Moses is writing this just before the Israelites are about to go into the “land of Canaan and utterly destroy it “without pity.” As they go into the land then, under the leadership of Joshua they were doing so with this curse of God in their mind – they knew the sin of Ham, the depravity of his son Canaan and the escalation of that sin in his descendents. After hundreds of years of grace and prosperity in a land described as “flowing with milk and honey” and with only increasing sin the iniquity of the Canaanites would be full (cf. Genesis 15:16) and God would use the Israelites as instruments to deal with the sons of Canaan.

²³ Along with the Mormon Church and the Jehovah’s Witnesses many Christian commentators took this position. These include; Albert Barnes, Gustav Friedrich Oehler, (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 56), Kiel; Alford (cites Kiel as his own opinion); John Monro Gibson (*The Ages Before Moses*, 144); Murphy, (*Commentary*, 238); Joseph Benson; Griffith Thomas (*Through the Pentateuch Chapter by Chapter*, 39), Alfred Edersheim (*Bible History*, 39), John Murray (*Principles of Conduct*, 96); A. W. Pink (*Gleanings in Genesis*, 125); Thomas Newton (*Dissertations on the Prophecies*, 12).

²⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *The Work of Thomas Goodwin*, (Eureka, CA: Tanski Publications), 9:38.

²⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*,” in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:268-269, nt.1. See also Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton*, (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 14:390.