

Noah's Drunkenness and The Curse on Canaan

The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave." After the flood Noah lived three hundred and fifty years. All the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died. (Genesis 9:18-29)

The names of Noah's sons are always listed in the same order in the Bible. However Japheth was actually the oldest, Shem the middle son, and Ham the youngest. Arthur Custance has a thorough study of these three men and the contributions in history which are unique to each branch of Noah's family. See his book [Noah's Three Sons](#). The above passage from Genesis makes clear that all human beings on earth today are descended from these three men and their wives (the women are unnamed in Scripture). This is yet another argument for a universal, global flood which reduced the entire human population to a total of eight individuals. Although Noah lived an additional 350 years after the Flood, he evidently had no additional children. All human beings who have ever lived on earth carry the original genetic programming God built into Adam.

In a rather matter-of-fact manner, Genesis 9 records an incident in Noah's life which provoked a major family crisis. Noah is not called to account for getting drunk. It was probably an isolated incident, though it would certainly have been wrong as far as God is concerned. The Flood had not in any way eradicated original sin in the lives of Noah, his sons or their three wives. In spite of the family's devotion to God signified by Noah's sacrifice when they all emerged from the Ark.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, "Go forth from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring forth with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh --birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth--that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply upon the earth." So Noah went forth, and his sons and his wife and his sons'

wives with him. And every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves upon the earth, went forth by families out of the ark. Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:13-22)

We are not told how long after the Flood the incident of Noah's drunkenness occurred. It must have been many years or more likely many decades after the Flood, so at the very least Noah's grandchildren had been born and were probably present, probably as young adults. The infrastructure of the great civilization which existed before the Flood was all gone, farming and animal husbandry supported the family of Noah as they grew in number. They lived at first only in tents. Permanent buildings and cities came later.

The youngest son Ham happened into his father's tent when Noah was drunk, asleep, and naked. Some commentators have suggested Ham committed some sexual misdeed, but this is not likely. His sin was more likely that he boasted to his brothers about seeing their father naked--thus dishonoring Noah greatly. Shocked and alarmed, Japheth and Shem took a robe and walked backwards into the tent, covering their father, but not allowing themselves to see him naked.

Upon waking, Noah is made aware of Ham's behavior and he evidently makes it an occasion for a family conference. As the family Patriarch, Noah makes cryptic prophetic remarks about his sons and their futures as he sees it unfolding. Later on Jacob for instance would do a similar thing (Genesis 48-49).

Noah says nothing about Ham, but rather he picks out one of Ham's sons, Canaan, evidently the youngest: "The sons of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan." (Genesis 10:6).

Noah could hardly bring up the issue of Ham's transgression without indicting himself for his own drunkenness, as H.C. Leupold and Arthur C. Custance both note. But Noah has seen a weakness in Ham--Ham had taken sensual pleasure in seeing his father naked, and he was irreverent in boasting to his brothers. Noah perceived that the same weakness existed in his grandson Canaan--but probably to an even greater degree than was evident in Ham. This story seems to be a case of generational sin. A particular congenital moral weakness in a family may erupt in full measure in a later generation. History of course confirms that Canaan's offspring were indeed a grossly immoral lot.

"Altogether too much emphasis has been placed upon the idea of the curse at this point. In this section the trying to eliminate the idea of the curse, for it manifestly lies in the text, all who associate personal resentment or any form of ill will with this utterance of Noah, do the godly man a gross injustice. Further more, to hold that this word broods like a dark and inescapable fate over the future of a race, is to hold to a very grievous misunderstanding. True, the feelings of a good man have been outraged. Equally true, he gives vent to righteous indignation. But, for the most part, being a man who has the Holy Spirit, he speaks a Word of prophecy.

This prophetic word is to serve as a guide for the human race as well as for a solemn warning for all times to come. Blessings and curses of parents may be more than idle words, but a parent who stands in the fear of God would hardly venture to lay grievous disabilities upon great portions of the human race, nor would God grant their wish if they attempted it. Being so accurate a delineation of the future of the three branches of the human family as we shall find this word to be, it approves itself to the thinking man as a truly prophetic utterance. Much serious misunderstanding has grown out of a refusal to take this word at its actual face value, especially the word "Canaan." Ham is not cursed, no matter how freely pro-slavery men may have employed this text. Canaan is the fourth son of Ham (10:6) and so may roughly be said to represent one fourth of the Hamitic race. He alone is under consideration here. The rest of the Hamitic stock ' apparently, does not come under consideration because it is neither directly blessed nor cursed. Its influence on the development of the rest of the human race is practically nil and, therefore, need not be mentioned here.

Now the descendants of Canaan, according to 10:15-20, are the peoples that afterward dwelt in Phoenicia and in the so-called land of Canaan, Palestine. That they became races accursed in their moral impurity is apparent from passages such as 15:16; 19:5; Lev. 18 and 20; Deut. 12:31. In Abraham's day the measure of their iniquity was already almost full. By the time of the entrance of Israel into Canaan under Joshua the Canaanites, collectively also called the Amorites, were ripe for divine judgment through Israel, His scourge. Sodom left its name for the unnatural vice its inhabitants practiced. The Phoenicians and the colony of Carthage surprised the Romans by the depth of their depravity. Verily cursed was Canaan!" ---H. C. Leupold, *Genesis*.

In his outstanding commentary on Genesis, James Montgomery Boice says this:

"According to some theology, Noah would have lost his salvation when he became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. But Noah had been sealed into one of the eternal covenants of God, and although he was uncovered physically, he was nevertheless covered over by the righteousness of Christ. He was still God's child, and God was about to use him again. He is to prophesy. "Just as Jonah was given a great task to do after his flight and his folly, so Noah is given a new opportunity to be the mouthpiece of God. The circumstances of his sin are made the framework of the prophecy which God speaks through him. The man who was drunk with wine is now filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). He is now covered with the garment of prophecy and speaks forth the will and the Word of God."

Noah's prophecy contains an outline sketch of history, focused in a general way on the descendants of Noah's three sons. As such it has three parts: 1) a curse on Canaan, the son of Ham, and blessings upon 2) Shem and 3) Japheth.

The curse on Canaan is the most difficult to understand because, as we suggested in an earlier question, it is hard to see why he should be cursed rather than his father, who actually did the wrong. But we note the following. First, it is a biblical principle (whether liked by us or not) that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children even to the third and fourth generations (Exod. 20:5). Second, the punishment, though inflicted on Canaan, was appropriate to Ham since he reaped exactly as he had sown. He sinned as a son and was punished in his son. Third, the assigning of the punishment to Canaan may have been (as is so often the case in God's judgments) a function of the mercy of God, who could have cursed Ham and all his descendants but instead restricted the punishment to only this fourth part, Canaan being only one of Ham's four sons. Whatever the reasoning may be, the judgment is nevertheless pronounced: "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers" (v. 25).

...this curse was pronounced on the ancient peoples of the Near East, most of whom were later conquered by the Jews under Joshua. But notice this: they were not the Negro races. In an earlier generation prejudiced minds used this text to justify their enslaving of Africa's black populations, but this is without any biblical basis and is a proof rather of the expositors' sin. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the slave trade was at its height, did anyone ever imagine that Ham was the father of the black races or that there was a curse on them.

The second part of Noah's oracle is a blessing on Shem or, as Noah actually puts it, on Shem's God. "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem" (v. 26). This is a great blessing because it is a new step in the Old Testament's unfolding messianic prophecies. The first messianic prophecy was in Genesis 3:15, in which a Deliverer was promised who should crush the serpent's head. It is evident as the story of Genesis unfolds that he will appear in the godly line of Seth rather than the ungodly line of Cain. Now, in a prophecy made following the Flood, the line of descent is narrowed to the Semitic peoples, who descended from Shem and whose story is particularly unfolded in the remainder of Genesis. In time the promise is narrowed still further to the house of David and to his descendants: Joseph (in the line of David's son Solomon) and Mary (in the line of David's son Nathan). The prophecy of blessing in Genesis is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Finally, there is a prophecy Japheth and his family. Two things said of Japheth: first, God will extend territory (the name Japheth means "enlarge" so this is a play on words), second, he will live in the tents of Shem (v. 27). This latter promise is to be taken spiritually, meaning, not that the descendants of Japheth shall take Shem's territory, but that they enter into his spiritual blessing through association with the Semitic peoples. The descendants of Japheth have established the great nations of the world. America is in this line of descent. But our blessing does not come from extensive territory or wealth but our acquaintance with the God of Israel and our faith in Him who will yet sit upon the throne of His father David reign forever." James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*.

The enlargement of Japheth is now obvious from history. The European nations rapidly built what we like to call our great "western civilization." It rose on the foundations of Greek and Roman philosophy. Our science, economic system, educational system and style of government have allowed the development of a rich and expansive character. In due time it was the Norse, then the English, the French, the Spanish, the Italians, the Portuguese who sailed the seas to the West and to the South colonizing the New World, and Africa, India and the Far East. These expansionist moves were mostly at the expense of the Hamitic peoples who already lived in those lands.

As Arthur Custance develops at length, Japheth represents the Intellectual side of man, Shem the Spiritual and Ham the Physical. Japheth has enjoyed a close synergistic relationship with Shem--Biblical thought has had a greater impact and more lasting effect on the descendants of Japheth than on the sons of Ham.

God's intention of course was that all three branches would know and serve the living God with equal devotion. The wholeness of man's life as body, soul and spirit is represented only when all three sons of Noah find their place in God's plan for mankind.

Arthur Custance's ["Noah's Three Sons"](#) is wonderfully rich in developing these ideas further.

Ray Stedman's excellent commentary on this section of scripture, [The Three Families of Man](#) is very helpful.

[Alcohol Rehab](#)