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MINISTRIES

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Noah’s Nakedness and Canaan’s Curse (Genesis 9:20-27)

Today we’re going to explore perhaps one of the most bewildering narratives in the Bible. It’s found in Genesis 9:20-27. Here is a summary of the passage:

- After the great flood, Noah drank wine produced from a vineyard he planted, got drunk, and laid naked in his tent (9:20-21).
- Noah’s son Ham “saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside” (9:22).
- Shem and Japheth covered their father’s nakedness and did not look upon his nakedness (9:23).
- When Noah woke up and saw what Ham had “done to him,” he cursed Ham’s son Canaan (9:24-25) and blessed Shem and Japheth (9:26-27).

This passage has perplexed interpreters for generations, and has resulted in a range of theories regarding the nature of Ham’s sin. What exactly did Ham do that was so abhorrent that it warranted a curse, not upon himself, but upon his son Canaan? The three most popular theories are as follows:

- 1) Ham saw his father naked
- 2) Ham castrated Noah
- 3) Ham sexually abused Noah

Let’s go through each of these options.

1) Ham saw his father naked

This position simply takes the text for what it says. As scholars John Bergsma and Scott Hahn explain:

The strength of this position is its conservatism: it refuses to see anything in the text that is not explicit.

-John S. Bergsma & Scott W. Hahn, *Noah’s Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan* (JBL 124/1, 2005), p. 27

However, there are problems with this explanation. First, there is no evidence in any ancient literature,

biblical or otherwise, indicating that merely seeing a parent's naked body was some grave sin. Second, the punishment seems excessive and doesn't fit the crime. Was Noah just really insecure about his nakedness—enough to curse his grandson? That seems unlikely. As Bergsma and Hahn go on to explain:

[V]oyeurism is a nonexplanation, since it fails to elucidate either the gravity of Ham's offense or the reason for the curse of 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.

-John S. Bergsma & Scott W. Hahn, *Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan* (JBL 124/1, 2005), p. 27

Third, Noah's recognizing what Ham "had done to him" (9:24) suggests more than just looking upon him. Ham *did* something, not just saw something. Besides, if Noah were in a state of drunkenness, maybe even passed out, would he even remember his son passively looking at him? Again, there seems to be more going on here.

2) Ham castrated Noah

Another option is that Ham castrated Noah. This view is discussed within the rabbinic literature:

The Gemara explains: The one who says that Ham castrated Noah adduces the following proof: Since he injured Noah with respect to the possibility of conceiving a fourth son, which Noah wanted but could no longer have, therefore Noah cursed him by means of Ham's fourth son. Ham's sons were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan, and of all of these, it was Canaan whom Noah cursed.

-b.*Sanhedrin* 70a

So, according to this view, Ham castrated his father Noah, resulting in Noah not being able to have a fourth son. Thus, Noah cursed Ham's fourth son.

The problem with this view is that there is simply nothing in the text itself that would suggest castration. Moreover, one must assume that Noah even wanted a fourth son, but nowhere does the text actually say that. Therefore, this view seems contrived to say the least.

3) Ham sexually abused Noah

Another popular view is that Ham took advantage of his father sexually. The strength of this position is that the phrase "to see nakedness" is an idiom for sex. Ham "saw the nakedness of his father." That is, he engaged in sexual activity with him. We see this idiom in Leviticus 20:

Leviticus 20:17

If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, **and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness**, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. **He has uncovered his sister's nakedness**, and he shall bear his iniquity.

Here we see the phrase "to see nakedness" being equated with "to uncover nakedness." The phrase "to

uncover nakedness” is a well-known idiom for sexual intercourse, which is clear when you examine other passages in which the phrase is used (Leviticus 18; Ezekiel 16:36-37; 22:10, 18, 29). Since “to see nakedness” is equated with “to uncover nakedness,” it’s easy to recognize that both phrases are idioms for the same thing.

Additionally, there are perhaps some sexual undertones suggested in the text. Wine, for example, is frequently associated with sexuality in the Scriptures. The only other time Genesis references drunkenness is when Lot’s daughters got Lot drunk and had incestuous sex with him, which is a significant parallel to our passage in Genesis 9. Wine and the vineyard are both repeatedly associated with sexual intimacy throughout the Song of Solomon (1:2, 4, 6; 2:15; 5:1; 7:2, 9, 12). Moreover, scholars have suggested that the statement Noah “uncovered himself” (9:21, NASB) implies disrobing in preparation for sex. This is argued on the basis of the root word used for “uncovered himself,” which often appears in Leviticus 18 and 20 in the context of sexual relations.

The theory that Ham sexually abused Noah also provides a possible motivation for Ham’s act. As Bergsma and Hahn explain:

By humiliating his father, Ham hoped to usurp his father’s authority and displace his older brothers in the familial hierarchy [...] This explains why Ham promptly informed his brothers of what he had done.

-John S. Bergsma & Scott W. Hahn, *Noah’s Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan* (JBL 124/1, 2005), pp. 32-33

Some have objected that the brothers’ actions in covering “their father’s nakedness” and not looking upon his nakedness conflict with this idiomatic interpretation. Therefore, Ham’s “seeing” his father’s nakedness should be understood literally instead of as an idiom for sex. But as the scholar 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.

-Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Tests and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 67

In contrast to the other options we’ve discussed, this explanation appears to be more on the right track. It makes better sense of the nature of Ham’s sin. It accounts for the idiom, “to see nakedness,” in addition to other features of the text that may suggest sexual undertones. It provides a rationale for Ham’s act and an explanation for his telling his brothers.

However, it still doesn’t explain why *Canaan* is cursed. If Ham sexually abused his father, why wasn’t *Ham* the one who was cursed? There really isn’t a satisfactory explanation for Canaan being cursed according to this view.

While this third theory makes sense in a lot of ways, it still falls short in accounting for all the data. So,

how should we understand this text? Well, there is actually a fourth option that we can consider, which several scholars have argued for more recently. It's similar to this third option we just looked at, but it applies the idiom in a different way. While this interpretive option isn't as popular as the other three we explored, it seems to be the best explanation.

4) Ham had sexual relations with his mother, Noah's wife.

The previous view we explored is correct in the sense that "to see nakedness" is an idiom for sex, similar to the phrase "to uncover nakedness." However, as other biblical passages indicate, the nakedness of the father actually refers to *the nakedness of the mother*:

Leviticus 18:7-8

You 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. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.**

This is consistent throughout the biblical text; a woman's nakedness is described as her husband's nakedness (Leviticus 18:14, 16; 20:11, 21; Deuteronomy 27:20). Given this information, it appears that Ham seeing his father's nakedness may refer to having sexual relations with Noah's wife.

This is the only interpretation that provides an explanation for the curse of Canaan within the framework of the narrative itself. As Bergsma and Hahn explain:

[I]f Ham's deed is understood as maternal incest, it becomes possible to explain Canaan's origin as the fruit of that union. This insight suddenly illuminates two aspects of the text left unanswered by paternal-incest theorists: why Canaan is cursed, and why Ham is repeatedly identified as "the father of Canaan." Canaan is cursed because his origin was a vile, taboo act on the part of his father. 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."

-John S. Bergsma & Scott W. Hahn, *Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan* (JBL 124/1, 2005), p. 35

This interpretation also works with the idea that Ham was attempting to usurp his father's authority, which provides a motivation for Ham's act as well as his reason for telling his brothers. Indeed, there are biblical examples of people sleeping with the wives and/or concubines of others as a means of usurpation (e.g., 2 Samuel 16:20-23).

But wait! There's more! In Genesis 9:21, it says Noah uncovered himself in "his tent," but scholars have proposed that it should be translated as "her tent." The Hebrew word for tent is *ohel* (אֹהֶל), and in this verse it has a third feminine singular suffix attached (אֹהֶלָּהּ), the letter *hey* (ה). This indicates that it should read "her tent." We see the same thing in Genesis 24:67. Isaac brings Rebekah into his mother's tent. Literally it says, "into her tent, the tent of Sarah, his mother." You have the same word with the same third feminine singular suffix on the noun—and in Genesis 24:67, it's clear that it's a woman's tent. So in Genesis 9:21, Noah enters his wife's tent. Ham later enters her tent too.

But what about the brothers' actions in verse 23 suggesting a literal interpretation? Well, the rebuttal offered by Robert Gagnon in defense of his view that Ham sexually abused Noah, which we quoted

earlier, is equally applicable to this view: “The brothers’ actions play on the broader meaning of the phrase.” They not only refrained from sexual intercourse with Noah’s wife, but they also refrained from “seeing his nakedness” literally, covering him.

Here is how Bergsma and Hahn summarize the narrative in light of this information:

Noah becomes drunk and disrobes in “her tent” (אֶהֱלֵה) in preparation for intercourse but is incapacitated by his drunkenness (v. 21). Ham enters and “sees his fathers 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” (הַשְּׂמֹלֶת) to their humiliated father, avoiding not only the figurative “seeing of the fathers 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.

-John S. Bergsma & Scott W. Hahn, *Noah’s Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan* (JBL 124/1, 2005), pp. 38-39

In conclusion, the fourth option we’ve discussed, which is that Ham’s sin was sexual relations with Noah’s wife, appears to best account for all the data. It explains why Ham’s sin was so severe, Ham’s motivation for committing this act, and why it was Canaan who was cursed. Additionally, it provides an explanation for peculiar textual features, like Ham being repeatedly identified as “the father of Canaan,” the sexual undertones in the text, and so forth.

Hopefully this short examination of the interpretive options of this story helps you better appreciate and understand the biblical text.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

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FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

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