

Genesis 9:18-29

Noah's Shame

Life had begun to return to routines for Noah and his family. As time went on they built shelters and planted crops. Noah's sons began to have families of their own. They spread out a bit, no doubt after the confines of the ark, and began to live what could at least be described as normal lives. They enjoyed God's blessing, both in His provision and in His promise to never again destroy the earth by water. After a while, the Flood became a story told by old men around the fire at night, during which it is hoped they brought glory to God by praising His salvation..

Beginning Again

A census of this early post-diluvian world would have been simple enough. ¹⁸“Now the sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem and Ham and Japheth; and Ham was the father of Canaan. ¹⁹These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated” (v. 18-19). The narrator's focus has shifted from Noah to his children and grandchildren. The Flood, and the generation it had destroyed, was all but gone. Now the attention of the writer was turned to the future, as the Table of Nations would show.

The particular reference to Canaan is the first of a third generation after the Flood. In anticipated the Table of Nations genealogy of chapter 10 where we will learn that “the sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim and Put and Canaan” (Genesis 10:6). Therefore, Canaan was the fourth, and youngest son of Ham. Clearly the sons of Noah were following the biblical command to be fruitful and multiply.

The reason for mentioning Canaan here is twofold. First, as we will soon see, he was the recipient of Noah's curse. But allied with that was the significant presence the Canaanites would have in Israel's history. The “land of Canaan” would first be mentioned in context with Terah (Genesis 11:31), and the corrupting influence of the religious and immoral practices of the peoples living there would become a frequent recurrence in the biblical narrative.

Noah's Shame

After the Flood, Noah began to plant. “Noah began farming and planted a vineyard” (v. 20). The writer cannot mean that Noah was the first to farm, since agriculture had been around since the expulsion from Eden. Nor does the text necessarily imply that Noah was the first to plant grapes for the purposes of making wine, though some have used this as an excuse for his later behavior. Scripture simply states that after leaving the ark, Noah began to do what he had likely done before the Flood, that is, to grow his own food.

He had every need to, since without developing some sort of food production, he and his family could only hope to survive by hunting, or gathering whatever they could from the surrounding countryside. That Noah had success in his planting was a sign that God continued to bless the ground on which he worked, in keeping with His covenant promise that He “will never again curse the ground on account of man” (Genesis 8:21).

One of the crops Noah planted was grapes, from which he made wine. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most other ancient civilizations attributed viniculture to a gift from the gods. Think of Osiris in Egypt or of Dionysus in ancient Greece. The Ugaritic gods (ancient Mesopotamia) were notorious for their drunkenness. In the biblical narrative, however, the development of wine making was a human achievement, much like the human advances in the arts and sciences mentioned in the line of Cain in Genesis chapter 4.

There is no reason to suppose that all Noah planted was the vineyard, nor was there anything unusual in the cultivation of grapes for the production of wine. Wine was an important part of all ancient cultures, and indeed alcohol served as a primary beverage until the modern age when water was able to be consumed without fear of disease.

In fact, so appreciate was the fruits of the vine that, when praising God for His manifold blessings, the psalmist wrote.

“¹⁴He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
¹⁵And wine which makes man’s heart glad,
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man’s heart” (Psalm 104:14-15).

That the vineyard grew successfully was also an indication that rain must have fallen. There could not have been much in the way of irrigation developed so soon after leaving the ark, so the source of water for the crops to grow must have come from natural rainfall. The thoughts of Noah and his family as the clouds began to gather that first time after the Flood can only be imagined.

On one particular occasion, however, Noah “drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent” (v. 21). Noah enjoyed so much wine that he became drunk. In his state on inebriation, He entered his tent and removed his clothes.

The attentive reader might compare the Noah of this episode with the righteous, obedient, patient, and longsuffering Noah of the Flood narrative. Again, some have suggested that grapes, or at least wine, were unknown before the Flood, and Noah was unaware of the effects of its consumption. As we have mentioned, wine was not forbidden in Israel and, in fact, was enjoyed both for its pleasure and for its medicinal properties (Proverbs 31:6). In Israel, one could take the vow of a Nazarite, in which the participant abstained from wine or other strong drink. Such a vow would lose all meaning if wine drinking were prohibited as a matter of course.

However, drinking too much wine was condemned in strong and mocking language.

“²⁹Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has contentions? Who has complaining?
Who has wounds without cause?
Who has redness of eyes?
³⁰Those who linger long over wine,

Those who go to taste mixed wine.
³¹Do not look on the wine when it is red,
When it sparkles in the cup,
When it goes down smoothly;
³²At the last it bites like a serpent
And stings like a viper.
³³Your eyes will see strange things
And your mind will utter perverse things.
³⁴And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea,
Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast.
³⁵They struck me, but I did not become ill;
They beat me, but I did not know it.
When shall I awake?
I will seek another drink” (Proverbs 23:29-35).

Interestingly, the author does not pause in the text to condemn Noah for his behavior. Perhaps this is because Noah’s drunkenness was not the main point of the narrative.

No reason is given by the author for Noah becoming naked, but one might logically suppose it was to be intimate with his wife. Wine was considered an aphrodisiac in many ancient cultures (indeed its connection with sexual activity has not been lost on modern generations). And alcohol was known to cause one to behave inappropriately. As one prophet warned,

“¹⁵Woe to you who make your neighbors drink,
Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk
So as to look on their nakedness!
¹⁶You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor.
Now you yourself drink and expose your own nakedness.
The cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you,
And utter disgrace will come upon your glory” (Habakkuk 2:15-16).

The youngest son, Ham, observed his father in his nakedness. That Ham may have done so unintentionally is not excluded from the text. In other words, there is no reason to assume that Ham planned to spy on his father. However, in Jewish society, seeing a parent naked was an act that brought shame and dishonor on the parent. It was an indignity that could not be ignored. And to one of such standing as Noah, the leader of the entire human race at this point, it was an affront that could not be easily forgiven.

Some commentators have considered that imply inadvertently seeing Noah naked was hardly a punishable offense, and that the biblical writer must be understating what actually occurred in the privacy of the tent. Some authors, both Jewish and Christian, have insisted that a sexual sin must be alluded to in the narrative. They have suggested, for example, that Ham committed incest with his mother. In Leviticus 18:6-19, the term to ‘uncover’ is used with reference to heterosexual activity and was strictly prohibited among family members. That is, these commentators argue, that while his father was passed out from his

drunkenness, Ham had sexual intercourse with his mother and Canaan was the product of that illicit union. This would explain why Noah cursed Canaan when he discovered what had happened.

The language used here in this episode is used in a similar way in other places in the Old Testament to refer not merely to *seeing* but to sexual activity.

“the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose” (Genesis 6:2).

“When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force” (Genesis 34:2).

However, in those cases it is the context that lends itself to the interpretation that there has been a sexual act, not merely the language itself. In other places, and they are far more frequent, the biblical record is quite straightforward when describing sexual misconduct.

“⁴Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; ⁵and they called to Lot and said to him, ‘where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them’” (Genesis 19:4-5).

“³⁰Lot went up from Zoar, and stayed in the mountains, and his two daughters with him; for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; and he stayed in a cave, he and his two daughters. ³¹Then the firstborn said to the younger, ‘our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth. ³²Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him that we may preserve our family through our father.’ ³³So they made their father drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. ³⁴On the following day, the firstborn said to the younger, ‘behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve our family through our father.’ ³⁵So they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose” (Genesis 19:30-35).

The problem, therefore, with the interpretation that more is going on here than Ham simply seeing his father unclothed, is that such an interpretation does not make sense in the context of the entire narrative. While the wording *could* mean that with respect to Ham’s actions, it cannot carry that same meaning for the actions of Shem and Japheth. When they heard about Noah’s condition, “Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned away, so that they did not see their father’s nakedness” (v. 23). The writer cannot mean by this that they abstained from intercourse with their mother. The biblical text must be taken at face value, and no other offense than what actually happened need be implied.

But that offense was not merely in seeing his father. Ham could have inadvertently done so, discreetly covered his father’s shame, and said nothing. But he did not. He acted brazenly. Instead of covering his father’s nakedness, or at the very least simply going away as if he had seen nothing, “Ham, the father of

Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside” (v. 22). The context makes it clear that he did so to add to Noah’s embarrassment. It was not Noah’s drunkenness that was the topic of fraternal gossip, but rather it was his nakedness that Ham revealed. Ham bragged about what he had seen. He intentionally brought shame upon his father. In Israel, an offense that brought such indignity to a parent merited the highest consequences.

“¹⁵He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. . . . ¹⁷He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 21:15, 17).

“¹⁸If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. ²⁰They shall say to the elders of his city, ‘this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ ²¹Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear” (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

These are extreme examples to be sure, and there is no implication that Ham actually struck his father, but the point is still valid. Ham had, perhaps, unintentionally seen his father naked, but he intentionally told his brothers about it. Shem and Japheth did not take the bait. As we have seen, instead of joining in the humiliation of their father, they discreetly went into Noah and covered him.

Noah’s Curse

“When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him” (v. 24). Coming to his senses, at some point Noah came to understand his embarrassment. Scripture does not reveal how he came into that information, perhaps the elder brothers informed on their foolish and shameful sibling.

This led to an anomaly in the normal pattern that would be developed in Genesis. Often with the patriarchs, the natural custom of primogeniture was disregarded. We can think of Seth being given preference over Cain (for obvious reasons), but also Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Ephraim over Manasseh. Under similar circumstances, it would not have been surprising to find Ham blessed above his elder brothers Shem and Japheth. However his actions in this case precluded any such benefit.

Noah responded to Ham’s actions by cursing Canaan and blessing Shem and Japheth. It is curious that throughout the entire Flood narrative, Noah never speaks. He lived a distinctly righteous life, built a great ark, weathered the Flood, cared for the animal kingdom, offered a sacrifice, but he never spoke. Now he finally does, and his first words are “cursed be Canaan” (v. 25). They are part of a larger imprecation.

“²⁵Cursed be Canaan

A servant of servants

He shall be to his brothers.”

²⁶He also said,

“Blessed be the Lord,

The God of Shem;

And let Canaan be his servant.

²⁷May God enlarge Japheth,

And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;
And let Canaan be his servant” (v. 25-27).

Such a statement was significant, as the Old Testament saints believed that such curses and blessings influenced the destiny of those involved.

“Then Joshua made them take an oath at that time, saying, “cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his firstborn he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates” (Joshua 6:26).

“²²Then Joshua called for them and spoke to them, saying, ‘why have you deceived us, saying, “we are very far from you,” when you are living within our land? ²³Now therefore, you are cursed, and you shall never cease being slaves, both hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God” (Joshua 9:22-23).

Scripture is unclear as to why the wrath of Noah was directed at Canaan and not Ham. Many scholars have offered their suggestions as to how to make sense of this. Some suggest that this is simply a textual error, and that the wrong name was inserted into the text. Others state that the emphasis on Canaan has to do with the later troubles Israel had when they entered the land of the Canaanites, and this was a way to back date the troubles between the two cultures. Still others suggest that Canaan was the actual perpetrator of the shameful act. A final group argue that this is an example of *lex talionis* justice - the youngest son of Noah sins, so *his* youngest son must suffer the consequences.

Such attempts all do great violence to the basic text of Scripture. We are simply not told why Noah cursed Canaan.

It is important, though, to distinguish a curse uttered by man and a curse spoken by God. When God proclaimed a curse, it was a declarative statement. That is, it was a statement that caused something to come to pass. Think of Genesis 3:14-15, “¹⁴The Lord God said to the serpent,

‘Because you have done this,
Cursed are you more than all cattle,
And more than every beast of the field;
On your belly you will go,
And dust you will eat
All the days of your life;
¹⁵And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel.’”

It is not the same when man speaks a curse. When a man utters a curse, or a blessing for that matter, it is at best an imprecation to God. It is a prayer.

Since the Old Testament did teach that a person was responsible for their own crimes and not those of another, “fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16), it is important to view Noah’s curse as an imprecatory prayer to God, rather than a statement of fact.

Notice that Noah’s curse was complimented by a blessing. But the blessing was not directed toward the well-behaving brothers, but rather toward God, Himself. “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem” (v. 26). Noah was acknowledging that the good that he hoped would come to Shem would be the Lord’s doing. We shall see that this prayer was answered in the line of Shem which led to Abram.

In addition, that Canaan would be the servant of Shem is a theme we will see again when Isaac blesses Jacob (Genesis 27) and in the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37). The idea was that the later Israelites would subjugate the Canaanites. This promise would be given by God to Abram,

“¹⁸On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying,

‘to your descendants I have given this land,

From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

¹⁹the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite ²⁰and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim ²¹and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite” (Genesis 15:18-21).

And repeated to Moses,

“¹When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, ²and when the Lord your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them’ (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).

Such blessings and curses can better be understood, then, if seen as relating not to the individuals themselves, but to the peoples they came to represent. Israel and Canaan had a long and difficult future ahead of them. The negative influences of the Canaanites on the Israelites would become a commonplace of the biblical narrative.

But then whom does Japheth represent? As we will see when we look at the Table of Nations, Japheth has seven sons and seven grandsons (Genesis 10:2-4; 1 Chronicles 1:5-7). The peoples fathered by his offspring settled in the west and north of Israel, mainly in modern Anatolia and along the Aegean. Essentially, these peoples were Gentiles of Indo-European stock. Many scholars consider them to be the ancestors of the Philistines.

Takeaways

God has a sovereign plan that He works out in mysterious ways. We must be mindful of how the seemingly insignificant actions of our lives can have eternal impact. We must live with the awareness that He is always watching, and so are others whom we might influence for the kingdom of God.