Noah, Ham and the Curse of Canaan: Who Did What to Whom in the Tent?

A new solution to why Canaan (not Ham) was cursed.

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*Shem and Japhet Cover Noah*, Marius Bauer 1882-1914. National Library of the Netherlands

Following the story of the flood, Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk in his tent:

בראשית ט:כב וַיַּרְא חָם אֲבִי כְנַעַן אֵת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וַיַּגֵּד לִשְׁנֵי אֶחָיו בַּחוּץ…  
ט:כד וַיִּיקֶץ נֹחַ מִיֵּינוֹ וַיֵּדַע אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן.  
ט:כה וַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו.

Gen 9:22 Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers who were outside…  
9:24When Noah awoke from his drunken stupor he learned what his youngest son had done to him.  
9:25 So he said, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves he will be to his brothers.”

Why does Noah express such a severe curse for the seemingly minor sin of observing his nakedness?

What Did Noah’s Youngest Son Do?

As already anticipated by the Rabbis,[1] and suggested by some modern scholars, an earlier version of our story probably related a much more severe crime – the homosexual rape of his father when he was inebriated. This indeed is the kind of offense that would most naturally provoke the severe reaction depicted in the text. This assumption also accounts for the formulation of verse 24:

בראשית ט:כד וַיִּיקֶץ נֹחַ מִיֵּינוֹ **וַיֵּדַע** **אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ** בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן.

Gen 9:24 Noah awoke from his drunken stupor **and knew** what his youngest son **had done to him**.

If his son had only looked at him, how would Noah have “known” when he awoke that this had occurred?[2] Further, the final words “had done to him” imply a much more concrete and physical act than mere gazing.

The statement that Noah knew what was done to him after waking from his drunken stupor contrasts with Lot who was similarly abused sexually by his daughters while drunk, and concerning whom we read (Gen 19:35),

בראשית יט:לה וְלֹא **יָדַע** בְּשִׁכְבָהּ וּבְקֻמָהּ.

Gen 19:35 and **he did not know** when she lay down or when she arose.

Leviticus 20:17 shows that “seeing nakedness” is a euphemism for sex:

ויקרא כ:יז וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִקַּח אֶת אֲחֹתוֹ בַּת אָבִיו אוֹ בַת אִמּוֹ **וְרָאָה אֶת עֶרְוָתָהּ וְהִיא תִרְאֶה אֶת עֶרְוָתוֹ** חֶסֶד הוּא וְנִכְרְתוּ לְעֵינֵי בְּנֵי עַמָּם עֶרְוַת אֲחֹתוֹ גִּלָּה עֲו‍ֹנוֹ יִשָּׂא.

Lev 20:17 If a man has sexual intercourse with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or his mother, **so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness,** it is a disgrace. They must be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has exposed his sister’s nakedness; he will bear his punishment for iniquity.

Most likely, the phrase describing Noah’s nakedness, “and he became revealed (וַיִּתְגַּל) inside his tent” was meant to evoke the theme of incest, as “revealing of nakedness” serves as the euphemism for incest in the prohibitions of Leviticus:

ויקרא יח:ו אִישׁ אִישׁ אֶל כָּל שְׁאֵר בְּשָׂרוֹ לֹא תִקְרְבוּ לְגַלּוֹת עֶרְוָה…

Lev 18:6 None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness…

Thus, the sin, in the original narrative, is not homosexual sex itself, but forced incest of a son with his father in a situation in which the father has no ability to defend himself; this would explain the harshness of the father’s curse.[3]

Covering Noah

How then do we explain the part of the story in which Noah’s other sons enter the tent and cover their father without looking at him:

בראשית ט:כג וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וָיֶפֶת אֶת הַשִּׂמְלָה וַיָּשִׂימוּ עַל שְׁכֶם שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּלְכוּ אֲחֹרַנִּית וַיְכַסּוּ אֵת עֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם אֲחֹרַנִּית וְעֶרְוַת אֲבִיהֶם לֹא רָאוּ.

Gen 9:23 Shem and Japheth took the garment and placed it on their shoulders. Then they walked in backwards and covered up their father’s nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so they did not see their father’s nakedness.

This clearly implies that Canaan’s sin was gazing and nothing more.[4] Nevertheless, I believe that the evidence in favor of the sexual interpretation is too strong to simply dismiss.

Shem and Japhet’s Mitzvah and Blessing:  
Secondary Additions

I suggest that the text was revised by an editor who took the *euphemism* “seeing nakedness” literally, as if the sin was really visual alone. Whether out of deference to Noah or in the name of modesty more generally, this editor sought to temper the severe offense of forced incest with an incapacitated father.[5] This reinterpretation was accomplished by adding a report about the two brothers’ contrasting act of covering their father without looking.

The same editor also added the report of the perpetrator mockingly (?) relating to his brothers that he saw their father’s nakedness (verse 22b: “He told his two brothers who were outside”) so as to facilitate the subsequent presentation of the brothers’ contrasting act; the same editor then added the blessings of Shem and Japhet, the two “good” brothers/sons, at the end of the story.

In short, according to this reconstruction, the blessings of Shem and Japhet (beginning with “he ***also*** said”) and the subordination of Canaan to both of them are secondary (verses 26-27) additions. Thus, the original story told simply of the sin of the youngest son against his father, and the cursing of Canaan to be subservient to his unnamed brothers.[6] Admittedly, this story is disappointingly brief in comparison with the one we are used to. On the other hand, it seems only fitting that a story as unseemly as this one would lack narrative embellishment and be as concise and to the point as possible. (For a comparison with the similarly brief account of Reuben and Bilhah, see postscript.)

Why Curse Canaan and Not Ham?



For another approach, see  [“Noah’s Nakedness: How the Canaan-Ham Curse Conundrum Came to Be”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/noahs-nakedness-how-the-canaan-ham-curse-conundrum-came-to-be" \t "_blank)

The original story about forced rape of a father would explain why Noah would curse his youngest son so harshly, but Canaan is not Noah’s youngest son; Japhet is! In fact, Canaan isn’t Noah’s son at all! For this reason, many scholars suggest that in an earlier form of the story, Canaan must have been Noah’s youngest son, not Japhet.[7] Without the redaction supplement of “Ham the father of,” v. 22 would have originally read “[Ham, father of] Canaan saw his father’s nakedness.”[8] It indeed makes perfect sense to accept this reconstruction of v. 22, and to assume that if the story concludes with the cursing of Canaan, Canaan must have been the original youngest-son-culprit of the story.

On the other hand, the idea that Canaan was Noah’s youngest son is difficult. Verses 18-19, which introduce the non-Priestly account here, state that Noah’s three sons are Shem, Ham, and Japhet, and that they are the progenitors of the world. Moreover, the nation lists in chapter 10 (Priestly and non-Priestly alike) treat Ham as the father of Canaan and the progenitor of nations; Canaan and his offspring are only a subgroup under Ham.

A Story about Ham and His Son Canaan

Thus, I suggest that the story was not originally about Noah at all, but about Ham, and its original place was likely in ch. 10, as part of the account of the descent of the Hamite nations:

בראשית י:ו וּבְנֵי חָם כּוּשׁ וּמִצְרַיִם וּפוּט וּכְנָעַן. **//**ט:כ וַיָּחֶל [חם] אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטַּע כָּרֶם.  
ט:כא וַיֵּשְׁתְּ מִן הַיַּיִן וַיִּשְׁכָּר וַיִּתְגַּל בְּתוֹךְ אָהֳלֹה.  
ט:כב וַיַּרְא **//** כְנַעַן אֵת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו **//**ט:כד וַיִּיקֶץ **//** מִיֵּינוֹ וַיֵּדַע אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן.  
ט:כהוַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו.

Gen 10:6 And the sons of Ham were Kush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. **//**  
9:20**[**Ham], a man of the soil, began to plant a vineyard.  
9:21 When he drank some of the wine, he got drunk and uncovered himself inside his tent**//**9:22 and Canaan “saw his father’s nakedness” //  
9:24 When (Ham) awoke from his drunken stupor he understood what his youngest son had done to him.  
9:25 So he said, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves he will be to his brothers.”

If our story tells us that a youngest son saw the nakedness of his father, and that father cursed Canaan, we should naturally conclude that the father must have been Ham, whose youngest son was Canaan (Gen 10:6)! When the editor changed the original sinning son from Canaan to Ham, he was forced to change the sexually compromised father from Ham to Ham’s father, Noah (vv. 20 and 24), and he thus moved the entire account to chapter 9, since Noah dies at the end of that chapter.[9] The editorial conversion of the identity of the father to Noah goes hand in hand with the supplementation of the meritorious act of Noah’s sons, Shem and Japhet, and the addition of their blessings. If Ham were left as the compromised father there would be no way to present Shem in particular as designated for divine blessing (see further below).

A further consideration suggests that this story was originally about Canaan and Ham is that this fits well with historical reality. The Canaanite territory was politically subservient to Egypt for a long period of time. The El Amarna tablets (14th cent. B.C.E.) provide well-known testimony to this fact. Accordingly, our original story explained the servitude of Canaan to his older brothers such as Egypt, not to Israel, who was never considered part of Canaan’s family.

Introducing Noah Again

‍This suggestion helps clear up some other anomalies in the text as well. The words “a man of the soil” sound like they are introducing us to a character of which we little or no acquaintance. Yet, in the current version of the text, the verse introduces the well-known Noah! What is more, it is strange that nothing was mentioned of Noah’s profession before this stage and that only now, at the end of the account of his life, do we hear that he was a man of the field.

Instead, it seems that two different characters are being conflated in the present form of the Hebrew text—Noah, originally the hero of the flood, and Ham the man of the soil who was molested by his son Canaan.

Bringing Shem and Japhet into the Story

Once the perpetrator of the crime was identified as Ham rather than Canaan, the originally unnamed older brothers automatically became identified as Shem and Japhet (in spite of the fact that Japhet is in all other passages presented as Noah’s youngest son). The addition of their meritorious act on behalf of their father allowed the editor to bestow blessings on them and to transform the story from one of relatively limited scope (Canaanites being dominated by Egyptians) to one of worldwide proportions.

The secondary character of the blessings of Shem and Japhet is further indicated by the fact that while the curse of Canaan is “secular” in nature, the blessings of Shem and Japhet are religious and grounded in divine agency:

בראשית ט:כה וַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו.  
ט:כווַיֹּאמֶר **בָּרוּךְ יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם**וִיהִי כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ.  
ט:כז **יַפְתְּ אֱלֹהִים לְיֶפֶת** וְיִשְׁכֹּן בְּאָהֳלֵי שֵׁם וִיהִי כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ.

Gen 9:25 So he said, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves he will be to his brothers.”  
9:26 He also said, “**Worthy of praise is YHWH, the God of Shem**! May Canaan be the slave of Shem!  
9:27**May God enlarge Japheth’s territory and numbers**! May he live in the tents of Shem and may Canaan be his slave!”

It is only natural that the Israelite deity would be introduced into the story as it was transformed into one focused on Israelite destiny.

The most important thing to note about the edited story is the strange preservation of the curse as directed at Canaan (three times!), in spite of the identification of the sinner of the story as Ham and the brothers as Shem and Japhet. Wouldn’t it have been more consistent to change the curse of Canaan into the curse of Ham? This strange presentation was actually crucial to the editor’s interests. A central concern of his was to curse Canaan.

On the other hand, he did not want to present Canaan as subject of Egypt. The edited form of the story allows for the reidentification of Canaan’s master as Shem/Israel, rather than Egypt: “May Canaan be the slave of Shem!” *We* are the divinely destined masters of the Canaanites, proclaimed the editor, and not the Egyptians.[10] Further, Noah’s curse of Canaan and blessing of Shem shows that our mastery over the Canaanites is anything but an immoral abrogation. It is a fulfillment of a destiny foretold long ago.

Who Were Slaves to Egypt?

‍The original narrative may also have been seen as problematic insofar as it presented servitude to Egypt as a general Canaanite, rather than a specifically Israelite, national myth. (One may indeed wonder, from an historical perspective, if the Israelites did not in fact “adopt” this myth from the Canaanites, adapting it, of course, to their own cultural needs.) The reworking of the narrative ensured the exclusively Israelite character of the servitude to Egypt theme.

**Postscript**

Reuben’s Ravishing of Bilhah:  
A Parallel Account

We may compare the short original story of the son (Canaan or Ham) molesting his father (Ham or Noah) and being cursed with the similarly curt story of Reuben’s sin with his father’s concubine, Bilhah, as related in Gen 35:21-22:

בראשית לה:כא וַיִּסַּע יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּט אָהֳלֹה מֵהָלְאָה לְמִגְדַּל עֵדֶר.  
לה:כב וַיְהִי בִּשְׁכֹּן יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָרֶץ הַהִוא וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָה פִּילֶגֶשׁ אָבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Gen 35:21 Then Israel traveled on and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.  
35:22 While Israel was living in that land, Reuben had sexual relations with Bilhah, his father’s concubine, and Israel heard about it.

Once again, we have a brief story about a son who sexually disgraces his father, though in this case it is the eldest son rather than the youngest son, and the disgrace to the father is done indirectly through incest with the father’s concubine,[11] an act that the incest laws in the Torah call “revealing your father’s nakedness”:

Lev 18:8

עֶרְוַת אֵשֶׁת אָבִיךָ לֹא תְגַלֵּה **עֶרְוַת אָבִיךָ הִוא**.

Do not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; **it is the nakedness of your father**.

Lev 20:11

וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת אֵשֶׁת אָבִיו **עֶרְוַת אָבִיו גִּלָּה**…

If a man lies with his father’s wife, **it is the nakedness of his father that he has uncovered**…

Deut 27:20

אָרוּר שֹׁכֵב עִם אֵשֶׁת אָבִיו **כִּי גִלָּה כְּנַף אָבִיו**…

Cursed be he who lies with his father’s wife, **for he has revealed what his father has covered**…

Many have noted that the ending of the Reuben and Bilhah story is truncated. What happened when Israel “heard about it”? The story could hardly have simply ended there! The parallel with the Noah story suggests that the original continuation may be found in the “blessings” of Jacob before his death in Gen 49:[12]

בראשית מט:ג רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה כֹּחִי וְרֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי יֶתֶר שְׂאֵת וְיֶתֶר עָז.  
מט:ד פַּחַז כַּמַּיִם אַל תּוֹתַר כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ אָז חִלַּלְתָּ יְצוּעִי עָלָה.

Gen 49:3 Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, outstanding in dignity, outstanding in power.  
49:3 You are destructive like water and will not excel, for you got on your father’s bed, then you defiled it—he got on my couch!

Just as Noah immediately cursed his youngest son for taking sexual advantage of him, so Jacob, upon hearing about the act of his oldest son with his concubine, immediately pronounced the demotion of his status vis-a-vis his brothers.[13] If this conjecture is accepted, the similarity between the two stories is even greater. Note that brothers play no active role in the story of Reuben’s sin just as they play no active role in the reconstructed story of Ham and Canaan. And, at least if we follow the reconstruction of that narrative suggested above, it too ended with the father’s denunciation of the sinful son alone.

Incidentally, another parallel between the narratives should not be missed: just as the biblical editor sought to “sanitize” the sexual sin in the Noah story so did the Rabbis suggest that Reuben did no more than move his father’s bed from Bilhah’s tent to his mother Leah’s tent.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/noah-ham-and-the-curse-of-canaan-who-did-what-to-whom-in-the-tent)

1. See b. *Sanhedrin* 70a:

רב ושמואל, חד אמר: סרסו, וחד אמר: רבעו.

Rav and Samuel: One said “He castrated him,” the other said, “He took advantage of him sexually.”

See also, Rashi to Gen 9:22.

1. The NET translation of וידע נח as “Noah learned” cited above is a forced attempt to address this difficulty.
2. For this reason, Oxford biblical scholar John Day has recently rejected the homosexual rape interpretation. See John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11*(Bloomsbury, 2013).
3. Indeed, even the original text was squeamish about the matter and preferred using the euphemism of “seeing nakedness” and the indirect “what his son did to him.”
4. True, the curse of Canaan bestows the status of master to his unnamed brothers. Yet this does not necessitate a narrative presentation of a uniquely meritorious act that they performed in order to deserve this. All that is required in terms of narrative is to show that Canaan “earned” his curse.
5. In his [“How the Canaan Curse Conundrum Came to Be,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/noahs-nakedness-how-the-canaan-ham-curse-conundrum-came-to-be) (*TheTorah.com* [2015]), Zev Farber notes the awkwardness of phrase “Ham is the father of Canaan” and suggests that original story didn’t have Ham at all, and that this was added to make this non-Priestly story work with the Priestly framework of Shem, Ham, and Japhet being Noah’s sons. Similarly, Tzemah Yoreh argues that Noah originally had four sons, and that Canaan was demoted in the redaction; see Tzemah Yoreh, [“Noah’s Four Sons,”](http://thetorah.com/noahs-four-sons/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
6. The theory goes on to posit that this original story must have thought of Noah as having three sons, the youngest of which was Canaan. And since, as we are told, Shem and Japhet covered their father’s nakedness and were subsequently blessed, Shem, Japhet and Canaan must have been Noah’s “My Three Sons.” Theoretically, this makes perfect sense. On the other hand, it implies a conception of Canaan as brother of Shem similar to the way that Genesis presents Esau/Edom as the brother of Jacob/Israel. The problem with this is that there is very little evidence of a conception of Israelite kinship with the Canaanites in biblical literature. On the contrary, biblical literature points to various degrees of familial kinship with the Ishmaelites (through Abraham’s concubine), the Ammonites and Moabites (through Abraham’s nephew, Lot), the Arameans (cf. ארמי אבד אבי of Deut 26 and the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca) and the Edomites (=Esau), but not the Canaanites! Yet according to the theory of the original story of Gen 9 as generally presented, Noah’s curse against Canaan enacted the enslavement of the Canaanites to their “brother,” the Shemites (including, of course, Israelites), just as Isaac’s blessing, though given unwittingly, determined the subordination of the Edomites to their Israelite brethren. While it is possible that the original story of Gen 9 simply reflects a unique tradition of familial brotherhood between Israel and Canaan that was denied or suppressed by the dominant biblical tradition, the anomaly should give us reason to pause and wonder if this is really the best solution.
7. This also caused the redactor to add Canaan into v. 18 artificially, as a way of introducing him to the reader before the genealogies, to make the newly placed story comprehensible.

בראשית ט:יח וַיִּהְיוּ בְנֵי נֹחַ הַיֹּצְאִים מִן הַתֵּבָה שֵׁם וְחָם וָיָפֶת  
וְחָם הוּא אֲבִי כְנָעַן.  
ט:יט שְׁלֹשָׁה אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי נֹחַ וּמֵאֵלֶּה נָפְצָה כָל הָאָרֶץ.

Gen 9:18 The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth.  
Ham was the father of Canaan.  
9:19 These three were the sons of Noah, and from them the whole earth was populated.

1. I have no clear explanation for why the editor deemed it appropriate to present Canaan as slave to Japhet. Was he aware of Canaanite slavery in Greece?
2. Jacob finds no fault with Bilhah. Presumably, she was thought of as powerless, both physically and with regard to her lowly status, to fend off the future head of the clans of Jacob, though the incident would likely result in her being barred from Jacob’s bed (cf. Deut 24:1-4; 2 Sam 20:3). But the narrator does not appear to show interest in her concerns or plight. He does not even emphasize that rape was involved. This, it seems to me, is because Reuben’s offence against his father is not affected by the question of Bilhah’s complicity in the act.

Sleeping with a ruler’s (or a father’s) concubine is a way of asserting one’s own position as heir or ruler; Avshalom takes his father David’s concubines (2 Sam 16:21-22); Solomon executes his brother Adoniyah for asking to marry David’s final concubine, Avishag (1 Kings 2:17-22); Ish-Boshet accuses Avner of treachery for his relationship with Saul’s former concubine, Ritzpah (2 Sam 3:7-8). And thus, Jacob’s focus, as well as the focus of the Torah, is on the implication of Reuben’s act for Jacob and not about the consequences for Bilhah.

1. Admittedly, this conjecture is difficult in that it requires further conjectures concerning the earlier form of Gen 49. Was some earlier “blessing” of Reuben found there and then replaced with the one from our story?
2. While it hardly makes sense for Jacob to wait with his response till his death bed, it fit the interests of the editor to move it to Gen 49 so that all the tribes could be presented as addressed by Jacob together.
3. See discussion in Shani Tzoref, [“Did Reuben Lie with Bilhah?”](http://thetorah.com/did-reuben-lie-with-bilhah/) *TheTorah.com* (2013).