

*Studies in the Book of Genesis*  
*Part 1:*

**The Curse of Canaan**

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The bizarre little story in [Genesis 9:18–27](#) about Noah's drunkenness and exposure along with the resultant cursing of Canaan has perplexed students of Genesis for some time. Why does Noah, the spiritual giant of the Flood, appear in such a bad light? What exactly did Ham do to Noah? Who is Canaan and why should he be cursed for something he did not do? Although problems like these preoccupy much of the study of this passage, their solutions are tied to the more basic question of the purpose of the account in the theological argument of Genesis.

Genesis, the book of beginnings, is primarily concerned with tracing the development of God's program of blessing. The blessing is pronounced on God's creation, but sin (with its subsequent curse) brought deterioration and decay. After the Flood there is a new beginning with a renewal of the decrees of blessing, but once again corruption and rebellion leave the human race alienated and scattered across the face of the earth. Against this backdrop God began His program of blessing again, promising blessing to those obedient in faith and cursing to those who rebel. The rest of the book explains how this blessing developed: God's chosen people would become a great nation and inherit the land of Canaan. So throughout Genesis the motifs of blessing and cursing occur again and again in connection with those who are chosen and those who are not.

An important foundation for these motifs is found in the oracle of Noah. Ham's impropriety toward the nakedness of his father prompted an oracle with far-reaching implications. Canaan [V 137, p 224](#) [V 137, N 547, p 224](#) [p 224](#) was cursed; but Shem, the ancestor of Israel, and Japheth were blessed. It seems almost incredible that a relatively minor event would have such major repercussions. But consistently in the narratives of Genesis, one finds that the fate of both men and nations is determined by occurrences that seem trivial and commonplace. The main characters of these stories acted on natural impulse in their own interests, but the narrator is concerned with the greater significance of their actions. Thus it becomes evident that out of the virtues and vices of Noah's sons come the virtues and vices of the families of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this section in Genesis, then, is to portray the characteristics of the three branches of the human race in relation to blessing and cursing. In pronouncing the oracle, Noah discerned the traits of his sons and, in a moment of insight, determined that the attributes of their descendants were embodied in their personalities.<sup>2</sup> Because these sons were primogenitors of the families of the earth, the narrator is more interested in the greater meaning of the oracle with respect to tribes and nations in his day than with the children of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.<sup>3</sup>

Shem, the ancestor of the Shemites to whom the Hebrews belonged, acted in good taste and was blessed with the possession of the knowledge of the true God, Yahweh. Japheth, the ancestor of the far-flung northern tribes which include the Hellenic peoples,<sup>4</sup> also acted properly and thus shared in the blessing of Shem and was promised geographical expansion. In contrast, Ham, represented most clearly to Israel by the Egyptians and Canaanites, acted wrongly in violating sexual customs regarded as sacred and as a result had one line of his descendants cursed with subjugation.<sup>5</sup>

So the oracle of Noah, far from being concerned simply with the fortunes of the immediate family, actually pertains to vast movements of ancient peoples.<sup>6</sup> Portraying their tendencies as originating in individual ancestors, the book of beginnings anticipates the expected destinies of these tribes and nations. Vos fittingly notes that it occurred at a time when no event could fail to influence history.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Prologue ([Gen. 9:18–19](#))**

[Genesis 9:18–19](#) provides not only an introduction to this narrative but also a literary bridge between the Flood narrative [V 137, p 225](#) [V 137, N 547, p 225](#) [p 225](#) and the table of nations. The reader of Genesis is already familiar with the listing of the main characters of this story: Noah and his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth ([5:32](#); [6:10](#); [7:13](#); [9:1](#); and later in [10:1](#)). But in this passage two qualifications are supplied. They were the sons of Noah who came out of the ark, and they were the progenitors from whom all the nations of the earth originated. The first description connects the characters to the Flood account, and the second relates them to the table of nations.

Of greater significance for the present narrative, however, is the circumstantial clause in verse [18](#), “Now Ham was the father of Canaan.” Many have thought that this is a primary example of a redactor’s attempt to harmonize the deed of Ham and the curse of Canaan portions of this narrative.<sup>8</sup> If that were the case, it could have been done more effectively without leaving such a rough trace. The point of this clause seems rather to show the connection of Canaan with Ham. However, far from being merely a genealogical note, which would be superfluous in view of chapter [10](#), the narrative is tracing the beginnings of the family and shows that Ham, acting as he did, revealed himself as the true father of Canaan.<sup>9</sup> The immediate transfer of the reference to Canaan would call to the Israelite mind a number of unfavorable images about these people they knew, for anyone familiar with the Canaanites would see the same tendencies in their ancestor from this decisive beginning. So this little additional note anticipates the proper direction in the story.

### **The Event ([Gen. 9:20–23](#))**

noah’s behavior

The behavior of Noah after the Flood provided the occasion for the violation of Ham. Noah then acted so differently from before the Flood that some commentators have suggested that a different person is in view here.<sup>10</sup> But the text simply presents one person. The man who watched in righteousness over a wicked world then planted a vineyard, became drunk, and lay naked in his tent. Or, as Francisco said it, “With the opportunity to start an ideal society Noah was found drunk in his tent.”<sup>11</sup>

This deterioration of character seems to be consistent with the thematic arrangement of at least the early portion of Genesis, if not all of the book. Each major section of the book has the heading *תּוֹלְדוֹת אֱלֹהִים*, commonly translated “these are the generations [V 137, p 226](#) [V 137, N 547, p 226](#) [p 226](#) of.” The narratives that follow each heading provide the particulars about the person, telling what became of him and his descendants. In each case there is a deterioration from beginning to end. In fact the entire Book of Genesis presents the same pattern: The book begins with man (Adam) in the garden under the blessing of God, but ends with a man (Joseph) in a coffin in Egypt. The *תּוֹלְדוֹת* of Noah began in [6:9](#) with the note that Noah was righteous and blameless before the Lord, and ended in [9:18–27](#) with Noah in a degraded condition. But it was a low experience from which God would bring brighter prospects in the future.

Noah, described as a “man of the soil” ([9:20](#)), began by planting a vineyard. This epithet (*אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה*) is probably designed to say more than that he was a human farmer. In view of the fact that he is presented as the patriarch of the survivors of the Flood, Noah would be considered as the master of the earth, or as Rashi understood it, the lord of the earth.<sup>12</sup>

The two verbs (*וַיִּטֵּעַ ... וַיַּחַל*) in the sentence are best taken as a verbal hendiadys, “he proceeded to plant” a vineyard. Whether he was the first man in history to have done so is not stated, but he was the first to do so after the Flood. The head of the only family of the earth then produced the vine from the ground that previously produced minimal sustenance amid thorns.

The antediluvian narratives represent various beginnings, none of which appear particularly virtuous. Besides Noah’s beginning in viticulture, the first “hunter” is mentioned in [10:8](#). Nimrod was the first (*הַחַל*) “to be a mighty warrior on the earth.” And in [11:6](#), concerning the activities of Babel, the text reads, “they have begun (*הֵחִלּוּ*) to do this.” The use of the same verb in all these passages provides an ominous note to the stories.

The planting of the vineyard, however, appears to be for Noah a step forward from the cursed ground. Since Lamech, Noah’s father, toiled under the curse,<sup>13</sup> he hoped that his son would be able to bring about some comfort ([5:29](#)) and so he called him “Noah, which means ‘rest.’” Perhaps Noah hoped that cheer and comfort would come from this new venture.

The vine in the Bible is considered noble. The psalmist described the vine as God’s provision, stating that it “gladdens the heart of man” ([104:15](#)). A parable in Judges has a vine saying, “Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men?” ([9:13](#)). Not only did the fruit of the vine alleviate the pain of the

cursed, but also it is the symbol of coming bliss in the Messianic [V 137, p 227](#) [V 137, N 547, p 227](#) [p 227](#) age. [Zechariah 8:12](#) and [Isaiah 25:6](#) describe the future age by employing this idea.<sup>14</sup>

But while it may be that wine alleviates to some degree the painful toil of the ground, the Old Testament often warns of the moral dangers attending this new step in human development. Those taking strong vows were prohibited from drinking wine ([Num. 6](#)); and those assuming responsible positions of rulership were given the proverbial instruction that strong drink is not for kings, but for those about to die ([Prov. 31:4–5](#)).

The story of Noah shows the degrading effects of the wine—drunkenness and nakedness. No blame is attached in this telling of the event, but it is difficult to ignore the prophetic oracles that use nakedness and drunkenness quite forcefully. Habakkuk, for one, announced, “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies” ([2:15](#)). Jeremiah also used the imagery for shame and susceptibility to violation and exploitation, lamenting, “You will be drunk and stripped naked” ([Lam. 4:21](#)).

Since the prophets view drunkenness and nakedness as signs of weakness and susceptibility to shameful destruction, many have condemned Noah’s activities. The Talmud records that Noah was to be considered righteous only when compared with his wicked generation.<sup>15</sup> All that Rashi would say was that Noah degraded himself by not planting something else.<sup>16</sup> Most commentators at least view it as an ironic contrast in Noah’s character<sup>17</sup> if not an activity that is in actual disharmony with the picture of the man given earlier.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand there have been many who have attempted to exonerate Noah in one way or another. Medieval Jews took it in an idealistic way, saying that Noah planted the vine in order to understand sin in a better way and thus to be able to warn the world of its effects.<sup>19</sup> Various scholars have tried to free Noah from blame by viewing the passage as an “inventor saga.”<sup>20</sup> Noah, the inventor of wine, was overpowered by the unsuspected force of the fruit and experienced the degradation of the discovery.<sup>21</sup>

Cohen takes the exoneration a step further. Observing that the motif of wine in the ancient world was associated with sexuality, he argues that Noah was attempting to maintain his procreative ability to obey the new commission to populate the earth. To substantiate his view, Cohen drew on the analogy of Lot with his daughters ([Gen. 19:30–38](#)) and David with Uriah and Bathsheba ([2 Sam. 11:12–13](#)), since wine was used in each case to promote [V 137, p 228](#) [V 137, N 547, p 228](#) [p 228](#) sexual activity.<sup>22</sup> Cohen acclaims the old man for playing the role so well.

It cannot be denied that wine has been used in connection with sex. However, Cohen’s theory, no matter how fascinating, must be rejected as a highly speculative interpretation. It is more plausible to proceed on clear evidence and to take a normal, sensible approach. Later biblical allusions show drunkenness

and nakedness to be shameful weaknesses, often used figuratively for susceptibility before enemies. Noah is thus not presented in a good light.

In view of this, it appears that along with the primary intent of the narrative to set the stage for the oracle, the passage also presents a polemic against pagan mythology.<sup>23</sup> The old world saw Armenia as the original home of wine, but Egyptian literature attributed the invention of wine to the god Osiris, and Greek literature attributed it to Dionysius. The Genesis account, by contrast, considers the beginning of wine and its effect on man as less than divine. It has the trappings of depravity. Cursing and slavery, rather than festive joy, proceed from its introduction into the world. Any nation delighting in the vices of wine and nakedness, this polemic implies, is already in slavery.

#### ham's violation

Noah's condition prompted the sin of his son Ham. Ham, who again is said to be the father of Canaan, "saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside" ([9:22](#)). They in response carefully came in and covered the old man. When Noah learned what Ham had done to him, he cursed Canaan but he blessed Shem and Japheth.

What did Ham do that was serious enough to warrant such a response? One answer is that Ham did nothing at all to deserve such a blistering curse. Many writers believe that two traditions have been pieced together here, one about Ham and another about Canaan. Rice asserts, "All the tensions of [Gen. 9:18–27](#) are resolved when it is recognized that this passage contains two parallel but different traditions of Noah's family."<sup>24</sup> In fact he states that no interpretation that considers the story to be a unity can do justice to the text. But it must be noted in passing that positing two traditions in no way solves the tension; instead it raises another. If the parts of the story were from two irreconcilable traditions, what caused them to be united? To assert that two differing accounts were used does not do justice to the final, [V 137, p 229](#) [V 137, N 547, p 229](#) [p 229](#) fixed form of the text. The event was obviously understood to be the basis of the oracle which follows in [9:24–27](#).

Some commentators attempt to reconstruct what took place. Figart suggests that Ham and his brothers came to see Noah, and that Ham went in alone, discovered his father's condition, and reported it to his brothers who remedied the situation. Figart's point is that there was no sin by Ham.<sup>25</sup> He suggests that Canaan, the youngest, must have been responsible for the deed that incurred the curse.

But it seems clear enough that the story is contrasting Ham, the father of Canaan, with Shem and Japheth regarding seeing or not seeing the nakedness. The oracle curses Ham's descendant, but blesses the descendants of Shem and Japheth. If Canaan rather than Ham were the guilty one, why was Ham not included in the blessing? Shufelt, suggesting also that Canaan was the violator, reckons that Ham was reckless.<sup>26</sup> But it seems that the narrative is placing the violation on Ham.

Many theories have been put forward concerning this violation of Ham. Several writers have felt that the expression “he saw his nakedness” is a euphemism for a gross violation. Cassuto speculates that the pre-Torah account may have been uglier but was reduced to minimal proportions.<sup>27</sup> Greek and Semitic stories occasionally tell how castration was used to prevent procreation in order to seize the power to populate the earth.<sup>28</sup> The Talmud records that this view was considered by the Rabbis: “Rab and Samuel [differ], one maintaining that he castrated him, and the other that he abused him sexually.”<sup>29</sup> The only possible textual evidence to support such a crime would come from [Genesis 9:24](#), which says that Noah “found out what his youngest son *had done* to him.” But the remedy for Ham’s “deed” is the covering of Noah’s nakedness. How would throwing the garment over him without looking undo such a deed and merit the blessing?

Bassett presents a view based on the idiomatic use of the words “uncover the nakedness.”<sup>30</sup> He suggests that Ham engaged in sexual intercourse with Noah’s wife, and that Canaan was cursed because he was the fruit of that union. He attempts to show that to “see another’s nakedness” is the same as sexual intercourse, and that a later redactor who missed the idiomatic meaning added the words in [9:23](#).

But the evidence for this interpretation is minimal. The expression [הָרָאָה עֶרְוָה](#) is used in Scripture for shameful exposure, mostly of a woman or as a figure of a city in shameful punishment, [V 137, p 230](#) [V 137, N 547, p 230](#) [p 230](#) exposed and defenseless. This is quite different from the idiom used for sexual violation, [גָּלָה עֶרְוָה](#), “he uncovered the nakedness.” It is this construction that is used throughout [Leviticus 18](#) and [20](#) to describe the evil sexual conduct of the Canaanites. [Leviticus 20:17](#) is the only occurrence where [הָרָאָה](#) is used, but even that is in a parallel construction with [גָּלָה](#), explaining the incident. This one usage cannot be made to support Bassett’s claim of an idiomatic force meaning sexual intercourse.

According to [Genesis 9](#) Noah uncovered himself (the stem is reflexive). If there had been any occurrence of sexual violation, one would expect the idiom to say, “Ham uncovered his father’s nakedness.” Moreover, Rice observes that if Ham had committed incest with his mother, he would not likely have told his two brothers, nor would the Torah pass over such an inauspicious beginning for the detested Canaanites (see [Gen. 19:30–38](#)).<sup>31</sup>

So there is no clear evidence that Ham actually did anything other than see the nakedness of his uncovered father. To the writer of the narrative this was apparently serious enough to incur the oracle on Canaan (who might be openly guilty in their customs of what Ham had been suspected of doing).

It is difficult for someone living in the modern world to understand the modesty and discretion of privacy called for in ancient morality.<sup>32</sup> Nakedness in the Old Testament was from the beginning a thing of shame for fallen man. As a result of the Fall, the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, and, knowing they were naked, they covered themselves. To them as sinners the state of

nakedness was both undignified and vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> The covering of nakedness was a sound instinct for it provided a boundary for fallen human relations.

Nakedness thereafter represented the loss of human and social dignity. To be exposed meant to be unprotected; this can be seen by the fact that the horrors of the Exile are couched in the image of shameful nakedness ([Hab 3:13](#); [Lam. 1:8; 4:21](#)). To see someone uncovered was to bring dishonor and to gain advantage for potential exploitation.

By mentioning that Ham entered and saw his father's nakedness the text wishes to impress that seeing is the disgusting thing.<sup>34</sup> Ham's frivolous looking, a moral flaw, represents the first step in the abandonment of a moral code. Moreover this violation of a boundary destroyed the honor of Noah.

There seems to be a taboo in the Old Testament against such "looking" that suggests an overstepping of the set limits by identification [V 137, p 231](#) [V 137, N 547, p 231](#) [p 231](#) with the object seen ([Gen. 19:26](#); [Exod. 33:20](#); [Judg. 13:22](#); [1 Sam. 6:19](#)). Ham desecrated a natural and sacred barrier by seeing his father's nakedness. His going out to tell his brothers about it without thinking to cover the naked man aggravated the unfilial act.<sup>35</sup>

Within the boundaries of honor, seeing the nakedness was considered shameful and impious. The action of Ham was an affront to the dignity of his father. It was a transgression of sexual morality against filial piety.<sup>36</sup> Because of this breach of domestic propriety, Ham could expect nothing less than the oracle against his own family honor.<sup>37</sup>

shem's and japheth's reverence

Shem and Japheth acted to preserve the honor of their father by covering him with *the* garment ([Gen. 9:23](#)). The impression is that Ham completed the nakedness by bringing the garment out to his brothers.

The text is very careful to state that the brothers did not see their father's nakedness. Their approach was cautious, their backs turned to Noah with the garments on their shoulders. In contrast to the brevity of the narrative as a whole this verse draws out the story in great detail in order to dramatize their sensitivity and piety. The point cannot be missed—this is the antithesis of the hubris of Ham.

### The Oracle ([Gen. 9:24–27](#))

With the brief notice that Noah knew what his youngest son<sup>38</sup> had done to him, the narrative bridges the event and the oracle. The verb [וַיֵּדַע](#) would suggest either that Noah found out what had transpired or that he knew intuitively. Jacob suggests that "the different ways of his sons must have been known to him."<sup>39</sup> Certainly Noah knew enough to deliver the oracle, as Jacob much later had such knowledge about his sons ([Gen. 49](#)).

The essence of the oracle is the cursing of Canaan: "Cursed be Canaan! The

lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” Even when the blessings are declared for the brothers, the theme of Canaan’s servitude is repeated both times.

The very idea of someone cursing another raises certain questions as to the nature of the activity. Scharbert points out that (a) the curse was the reaction of someone to the misbehavior of another in order to keep vigorously aloof from that one and his [V 137, p 232](#) [V 137, N 547, p 232](#) [p 232](#) deed; (b) the one cursed was a subordinate who by the cursing would be removed from the community relationship in which he had enjoyed security, justice, and success; (c) the curse was no personal vendetta but was used to defend sacral, social, and national regulations and customs; and (d) the curse was effected by divine intervention.<sup>40</sup>

In the ancient world the curse was only as powerful as the one making it. Anyone could imprecate, but imprecation was the strongest when supernatural powers were invoked.<sup>41</sup> The Torah had no magical ideas such as sorcery and divination ([Exod. 22:17–18](#)). The curse found its way into Israel as part of an oath to protect its institutions. One who committed a serious transgression against covenant stipulations was delivered up to misfortune, the activation of which was Yahweh’s ([Deut. 28](#); [Josh. 6:26](#); [1 Sam. 26:19](#)).

So the curse was a means of seeing that the will of Yahweh was executed in divine judgment on anyone profaning what was sacred. It is an expression of faith in the just rule of God, for one who curses has no other resource. The word had no power in itself unless Yahweh performed it.<sup>42</sup> Thus it was in every sense an oracle. God Himself would place the ban on the individual, thus bringing about a paralysis of movement or other capabilities normally associated with a blessing.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage the honor of Noah and the sanctity of the family, one of God’s earliest institutions, are treated lightly and in effect desecrated. Noah, the man of the earth, pronounced the oracle of cursing. It is right, and Yahweh will fulfill it.

The second part of verse [25](#) specifies the result of the curse—abject slavery. This meant certain subjugation, loss of freedom for autonomous rule, and reduction to bondage.<sup>44</sup> A victor in war would gain dominion over the subjugated people so that they might be used as he pleased. However, in the Old Testament slaves were to be treated favorably, protected by law, and even freed in the sabbatical year ([Exod. 21:2](#), [20](#)).

But Noah was not content to give a simple pronouncement of Canaan’s slavery. By using the superlative genitive עֶבֶד עֶבְדִּים (“servant of servants”), he declared that the one who is cursed is to be in the most abject slavery. Canaan would serve his “brothers” (normally understood to refer to Shem and Japheth since the main idea of the curse is repeated in the next lines).

The fact that Canaan, and not Ham, received the curse has prompted various explanations. Of course there are those, as [V 137, p 233](#) [V 137, N 547, p 233](#) [p 233](#) already discussed, who posit separate traditions and see two distinct stories that were later fused into a single account. Others have found reason for excusing Ham on the basis of the blessing in [9:1](#). Not only would it be unusual for a person to curse what God had blessed, but also one would not normally curse his own



son.<sup>45</sup> While this may partially explain Noah's choice, it cannot be the whole explanation.

Kidner sees the principle of talionic justice in the passage. For Ham's breach of family, his own family would falter and that through the youngest.<sup>46</sup> But is it right to curse one for the action of another?

The Torah does incorporate this measure-for-measure judgment from one generation to another, but in such cases the one judged is receiving what he deserves. A visitation of the sins of the fathers on later generations will be on those who hate Yahweh ([Exod. 20:4](#)). A later generation may be judged for the sin of an ancestor if they are of like mind and deed. Otherwise they may simply bear the fruit of some ancestor's sin.

It is unlikely that Canaan was picked out for cursing just because he was the youngest son of Ham. On the contrary, the Torah, which shows that God deals justly with all men, suggests that Noah saw in him the evil traits that marked his father Ham. The text has prepared the reader for this by twice pointing out that Ham was the father of Canaan. Even though the oracle would weigh heavily on Ham as he saw his family marred, it was directed to his descendants who retained the traits.

In this regard it must be clarified that Canaan the people, not the man, are in view for the fulfillment of the oracle. The names Canaan, Shem, and Japheth all represent the people who were considered their descendants. So by this extension the oracle predicts the curse on the Canaanites and is much wider than a son's being cursed for his father, although the oracle springs from that incident in the family. Therefore the oracle is a prophetic announcement concerning the future nations. To the Hebrew mind, the Canaanites were the most natural embodiment of Ham.<sup>47</sup> 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 [V 137, p 234](#) [V 137, N 547, p 234](#) [p 234](#) 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.

The constant references to "nakedness" and "uncovering" and even "seeing" in this passage, designating the people of Canaan as a people enslaved sexually, clearly reminds the reader of the action of Ham, the father of Canaan. No Israelite who knew the culture of the Canaanites could read the story of their ancestor Ham without making the connection. But these descendants of Ham had advanced far beyond his violation. The attitude that led to the deed of Ham came to full fruition in them.

Archaeology has graphically illustrated just how debased these people were. Bright writes, "Canaanite religion presents us with no pretty picture.... Numerous debasing practices, including sacred prostitution, homosexuality, and various

orgiastic rites, were prevalent.”<sup>48</sup> Wright and Filson add that “the amazing thing about the gods, as they were conceived in Canaan, is that they had no moral character whatever. In fact, their conduct was on a much lower level than that of society as a whole, if we can judge from ancient codes of law.... Worship of these gods carried with it some of the most demoralizing practices then in existence.”<sup>49</sup> Albright appropriately adds to this observation.

It was fortunate for the future of monotheism that the Israelites of the conquest were a wild folk, endowed with primitive energy and ruthless will to exist, since the resulting decimation of the Canaanites prevented the complete fusion of the two kindred folk which would almost inevitably have depressed Yahwistic standards to a point where recovery was impossible. Thus, the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its nomadic simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics.<sup>50</sup>

So the text is informing the reader that the Canaanite people, known for their shameless depravity in sexual matters and posing a continual threat to Israel’s purity, found their actual and characteristic beginning in Ham. Yet these descendants were not cursed because of what Ham did; they were cursed because they acted exactly as their ancestor had. That moral abandon is fully developed in the Canaanites. The oracle announces the curse for this.

In actual fact Noah was supplicating God to deal with each group of people as they deserved, to the ancestor and descendants [V 137, p 235](#) [V 137, N 547, p 235](#) [p 235](#) alike. Since this request was in harmony with God’s will for the preservation of moral purity, He granted it.<sup>51</sup> If the request had not been in harmony, Noah’s curse would have had no result.

Canaan, then, is the prototype of the population that succumbed to enervating influences and was doomed by its vices to enslavement at the hands of hardier and more virtuous races.<sup>52</sup> Because Ham, the “father” of Canaan, had desecrated the honor of his father by seeing his uncovered nakedness, this divine and prophetic oracle is pronounced on the people who would be known for their immorality in a shameful way, a trait discernible in this little story in the history of beginnings.

The blessing aspect is given to Shem, but the wording is unexpected: “Blessed be the Lord [Yahweh], the God of Shem.” The emphasis on the possession of God by his name is strengthened in this line in a subtle way. Delitzsch says, “Yahweh makes himself a name in becoming the God of Shem, and thus entwines His name with that of Shem, which means ‘name.’”<sup>53</sup>

By blessing one’s God, the man himself is blessed. The idea is that Shem will ascribe his good fortune to Yahweh his God, for his advantage is not personal merit; his portion is Yahweh.<sup>54</sup> The great line of blessing will be continued through Shem from Noah to Abram, the man of promise.

Here again, however, the point of the oracle looks to the descendants. It would then be clear to Israel, who found themselves in such a personal,

covenantal relationship with Yahweh. that they were the heirs of this blessing.

The announcement of Japheth's share in the blessing of Shem is strengthened by the play on his name "Japheth" (יַפֶּתֿ), from the verb "to enlarge." Here too the descendants are in mind for they will expand and spread out in the world. The second part of this verse is the resultant wish that Japheth will dwell in the tents of Shem. This is most likely an expression of the prospect of peaceful cohabitation.<sup>55</sup> Certainly the prospect of this unification is based on the harmony of the ancestors in the story. As a partner in covering up Noah, Japheth's descendants are granted alliance with Shem in the subjugation of Canaan.

The church fathers saw this as the first sign of the grafting in of the Gentiles in spiritual blessings, but later revelation speaks more of that. All that can be said of [Genesis 9:27](#) in the oracle is that peaceful tenting of Japheth with Shem was a step toward that further ideal blessing.

#### V 137, p 236 V 137, N 547, p 236 p 236 The Epilogue ([Gen. 9:28–29](#))

The narrative, as well as the תּוֹלְדוֹת, ends with verses [28](#) and [29](#) supplying the final note of the genealogy of Noah, the last name on the table of [Genesis 5](#). A new תּוֹלְדוֹת begins in chapter [10](#).

The essential part of this narrative is most certainly the oracle, and the dominant feature of that oracle is the cursing of the Canaanites.<sup>56</sup> They are doomed to perpetual slavery because they followed in the moral abandon of their distant ancestor. Their subjugation would be contrasted by the blessing on the others: Shem has spiritual blessings by virtue of knowing Yahweh; Japheth has temporal blessings with the prospect of participation with Shem.

The curse narrative of [Genesis 9](#) immediately precedes the listing of the families and their descendants in [Genesis 10](#); if there were any question as to whom the narrator had in mind, the lines could be traced immediately.

Japheth, whose expansion was already anticipated in the oracle, represented the people who dominated the great northern frontier from the Aegean Sea to the highlands of Iran and northward to the steppes beyond the shores of the Black Sea. Those best known to the writer were the Hellenic peoples of the Aegean coastlands.<sup>57</sup>

Shem also is pictured as expanding, dwelling in tents. The oracle looks beyond the ancestor to his descendants, among whom were the Hebrews. It would be difficult to understand the narrator's assuming Yahweh to be covenanted with any other people. The possession of the blessing would be at the expense of the Canaanites whom Israel would subjugate, thus actualizing the oracle.

Canaan represents the tribes of the Canaanites who were considered to be ethnically related to the other Hamites, but were singled out for judgment because of their perverse activities. The curse announced that they would be enslaved by other tribes, a subjugation normally accomplished through warfare.

On the whole, this brief passage expresses the recoiling of Israelite morality at the licentious habits engendered by a civilization that through the enjoyment

and abuse of wine had deteriorated into an orgiastic people to whom nothing was sacred. In telling the story, the writer stigmatizes the distasteful practices of these pagans.<sup>58</sup>

V 137, p 237    V 137, N 547, p 237    p 237    Being enslaved by their vices, the Canaanites were to be enslaved by others. This subjugation, effected through divine intervention, is just: the moral abandon of Ham ran its course in his descendants.

It is not possible to take the oracle as an etiology, answering the questions as to why the Canaanites had sunk so low, or why they were enslaved by others.<sup>59</sup> At no time in the history of Israel was there a complete subjugation of Canaan. Many cities were conquered, and at times Canaanites were enslaved, but Israel failed to accomplish her task. These Canaanites survived until the final colony at Carthage was destroyed in 146 b.c. by the Romans. So there was really no time in the history of Israel to fit a retrospective view demanded by an etiology.

Rather, the oracle states a futuristic view in broad, general terms. It is a sweeping oracle announcing in part and imprecating in part the fate of the families descending from these individuals. It is broad enough to include massive migrations of people in the second millennium as well as individual wars and later subjugations.

The intended realization, according to the design of the writer, would be the period of the conquest. Israel was called to conquer the Canaanites. At the same time as the Israelite wars against the Canaanites (down through the battle of Taanach), waves of Sea Peoples began to sweep through the land against the Hittites, Canaanites, and Egyptians. Neiman states, "The Greeks and the Israelites, willy-nilly, were allies against the Canaanites and the Hittites during the great world conflict which came down through the historical memory of many peoples by many different names."<sup>60</sup>

In their invasions these people from the north sought to annex the coastland territory and make homes for themselves. Israel felt herself in the strongest moral contrast to the Canaanites (as Shem had felt to Ham). Any help from the Japhethites would be welcomed. Such a spirit of tolerance toward the Gentiles would not have been possible in the later period of Israel's history. Thus the curse oracle would have originated at a time *before the Conquest*, when the Canaanites were still formidable enemies.

In all probability the event and its oracle were recorded to remind the Israelites of the nature and origin of the Canaanites, to warn them about such abominations, and to justify their subjugation and dispossession through holy warfare. Israel received the blessing, but Canaan received the curse.