Noah's Inebriated Curse (Gen 9:20–27)*

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Abstract

Genesis 9:20–27 raises difficult exegetical questions, such as why Noah curses Canaan rather than Ham in 9:25–27. Additionally, the text has an infamous history of providing a popular defense of slavery in Africa and the United States. Some African American interpreters have argued that Noah's curse should not be understood as divinely sanctioned words because Noah is still under the influence of alcohol when he speaks. Linking Noah's actions in Gen 9:20–24 with his words in 9:25–27, these interpreters attend to the literary context of Noah's speech while also combatting one of the most noxious uses of the Bible in recent centuries. This article adds exegetical support to this approach, demonstrating how this interpretation avoids the pitfalls of other treatments while working exceptionally well on a literary level with the passage itself. All of Noah's behaviors in 9:21–27 align with clinical descriptions of alcohol intoxication.

Keywords

Noah, Ham, Genesis, drunkenness, racism, slavery, blessing and cursing

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Introduction

Few biblical texts are more notorious than Genesis 9:20–27. Exegetically, the passage has confused interpreters for centuries. What did Ham do to cause Noah's cursing (9:22)? Why does Noah curse Canaan rather than Ham (9:25–27)? Why does Noah interrupt his cursing to bless YHWH (9:26)? Why does Noah talk of Japheth inhabiting the tents of Shem (9:27)?

In addition to these sorts of interpretive questions, the text has an infamous history of providing a popular defense of slavery and oppression in Africa and the United States. Examples abound of preachers, politicians, and academics using this passage to damn people with darker skin to subservience.[1]

[1] On the use of Noah's curse in Africa, see Mohamed Adhikari, "The Sons of Ham: Slavery and the Making of Colored Identity," *South African Historical Journal* 27 (1992) 95–112, esp. 112; David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origin and History of the Curse of Ham* (Studies of the Bible and Its Reception; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), esp. 176–78 n. 18; Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 171–73; Emmanuel Katongole with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 56–59; Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 23; Jacob Meiring, "Shem, Ham, Japheth and Zuma—Genesis 9:25–27 and Masculinities in South Africa," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2 (2016) 223–40; James Chukwuma Okoye, *Genesis 1–11: A Narrative-Theological Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018) 116; Gerald West, *Genesis* (The People's Bible Commentary; Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006) 71; Gunther Wittenberg, "'. . . Let Canaan Be His Slave' (Gen 9:26): Is Ham Also Cursed?," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 74 (1991) 46–56, esp. 46, 55–56; Edwin Yamauchi, "The Curse of Ham," *CTR* 6 (2009) 45–60, at 56–58; cf. Temba T. Rugwiji, "Conceptualizing the Biblical View of Curse (Gen. 9:25–27) as a Metaphor for Natural Resource Curse in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Systems Perspective," *OTE* 31 (2018) 363–88. For treatments of this curse in American history, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); idem, *Black*, esp. 146–59, 218–37, appendix II; Haynes, *Curse*; Stacy Davis, *This Strange Story: Jewish and Christian Interpretation of the Curse of Canaan from Antiquity to 1865* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008); Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (ATLA Monograph Series 12; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1978). Many scholars have blamed Jewish communities for the advent of racist interpretations of Genesis 9:20–27, which has significant problems of its own. See David H. Aaron, "Early Rabbinic Exegesis on Noah's Son Ham and the So-Called 'Hamitic Myth,' *JAAR* 63 (1995) 721–59; David M. Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?," in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Towards a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 21–51; Jennifer Knust, "Who's Afraid of Canaan's Curse? Genesis 9:18–29 and the Challenge of Reparative Reading," *BibInt* 22 (2014) 388–413, at 404–6; Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 135–65; Yamauchi, "Curse," 49–52. To understand the historic origins of racist interpretations of this text, readers do well to consult David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009). See also the sources mentioned in Justin M. Reed, "The Injustice of Noah's Curse and the Presumption of Canaanite Guilt: A New Reading of Genesis 9:18–29," (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2020) 38–48.

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Abolitionists and others offered a variety of alternate interpretations. One interpretive strand merits particular attention because it provides compelling answers to the exegetical questions raised by the text. For centuries now, African American interpreters have argued that Noah's curse should not be understood as divinely sanctioned words because Noah is still under the influence of alcohol when he speaks. Thus linking Noah's actions in Gen 9:20–24 with his words in 9:25–27, these interpreters simultaneously pay attention to the literary context of Noah's speech while also combatting one of the most noxious uses of the Bible in recent centuries.

The purpose of this article is to add exegetical support to this insight, demonstrating how this interpretation avoids the pitfalls of other approaches while working exceptionally well on a literary level with the passage itself. Exegetical problems are quickly resolved when one realizes that Noah is either drunk or hungover while speaking in 9:25–27.

To understand the exegetical problems of the text, this article begins by critically reviewing scholarly proposals about what Ham did that merited Noah's curse. Next, it evaluates claims about why Noah curses Canaan instead of Ham. Finally, it builds upon African American interpreters, showing how Noah's behavior when cursing his offspring matches clinical descriptions of intoxicated and hungover individuals.

What Did Ham Do?

Many interpreters believe that Ham engages in behavior much more disturbing than merely seeing his father naked in Gen 9:22. Both the Talmud (b. Sanh. 70a) and Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105 CE), for example, talk of debate over whether Noah was raped or castrated.[2] Contemporary exegetes rarely argue that castration is in view.[3] The idea that rape or incest occurs, on the other hand, has continued to receive support.

Interpreters often reference other biblical texts, especially those from Leviticus 18–20, to suggest that Gen 9:22 contains a euphemism that describes incest on the part of Ham committed with either his mother or father. In these chapters from Leviticus, the Canaanites are associated with incest in 18:3, 24–25, 27.[4]

[2] Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (22 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005) 16:369; Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg et al., *Torah with Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated* (ArtScroll Series; 5 vols.; Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1999) 1:96.

[3] Robert Graves and Raphael Patai believe castration is "plausibl[e]" (*Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* [New York: Greenwich House, 1964] 121–24). There are, however, problems with Graves and Patai's treatment, as explained in Aaron, "Exegesis," 735–39. According to Gen. Rab. 36.7 and b. Sanh. 70a, castration is suspected because Noah curses Ham's fourth son. The logic is that Noah does so in retaliation for being unable to have a fourth son.

[4] Knust, "Afraid," 394–95. See also how non-Israelites are presented in Gen 19:30–38; 34:1–31 (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2004] 52–53; cf. Randall C. Bailey, "They're Nothing But Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives," in *Reading from This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* [ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann

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Maternal Incest

Several interpreters argue that Genesis's talk of Ham's seeing Noah's nakedness actually means that Ham slept with Noah's wife while Noah was unconscious.[5] This argument rests largely on Leviticus 18:7–8; 20:11a.[6] These verses forbid incest with one's mother. They prohibit uncovering "the nakedness of your father," equating it with "the nakedness of your father's wife." This equation has led some interpreters to suggest that when Genesis talks of Ham seeing Noah's nakedness, it employs euphemistic language to say that Ham actually had intercourse with Noah's wife.[7]

There are several benefits to this approach. First, one could understand why biblical writers might want to employ a euphemism to describe something like maternal incest. Second, within this interpretive framework, the severity of Noah's curses in 9:25–27 makes perfect sense. Jacob comes close to cursing Reuben for a similar offence (Gen 49:3–4). Third, if Canaan is conceived because of what Ham does, then one can understand why Noah would curse him in particular.[8] Fourth, if this approach is correct, then the flood narrative begins and ends with short episodes involving sexual offences (see 6:1–4).[9] Fifth, this story in 9:20–27 would have parallels with Gen 19:30–38: the use of alcohol, child-parent incest, and the offspring of such incestuous relationships being the progenitors of the Canaanites, Moabites, or Ammonites.[10]

A closer look at the texts, however, suggests that Gen 9:20–27 speaks of something different from Leviticus 18:7–8; 20:11a. Leviticus forbids uncovering the nakedness of a parent (e.g., ערות אביך וערות אמך לא תגלה [18:7]). In Genesis, however, Ham never uncovers the nakedness of Noah or his wife. Employing a *hithpael*, Gen 9:21 says that Noah uncovered himself (ויתגל).[11] Additionally, Lev

Tolbert; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995] 121–38, at 137).

[5] Frederick W. Bassett believes that this story *originally* spoke of incest before 9:23 was added by a redactor ("Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?," *VT* 21 [1971] 232–37, at 232–34). David Frankel makes a similar point ("Noah's Drunkenness and the Curse of Canaan: A New Approach," *JBL* 140 [2021] 49–68, esp. 65–66). John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn argue that the present narrative, though possibly truncated from a longer one, speaks of maternal incest ("Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan [Genesis 9:20–27]," *JBL* 124 [2005] 25–40; see also Charles David Isbell, "The Curse of Ham: Biblical Justification for Racial Inequality?," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2.2 [2020] 1–11, esp. 2–8). See also the sources mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 101–2.

[6] Bergsma and Hahn also mention Lev 18:14, 16; 20:20–21 ("Nakedness," 34, although this text mistakenly refers to 20:20 as 20:30); Deut 23:1; 27:20.

[7] A better interpretation of these Levitical texts is offered by Brian Rainey, "Indecent Exposure: Social Shame, *ʿerwâ* and the Interpretation of Gen 9:20–27," *VT* 70 (2020) 674–95, at 685.

[8] Bassett, "Nakedness," 235; Bergsma and Hahn, "Nakedness," 26.

[9] H. A. J. Kruger, "Creation-Uncreation Reflection of Reversal Motifs in Genesis 9:18–24 (25–29)," in *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, July 29–August 5, 1997, Division A: The Bible and Its World* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1999) 129*–40*, at 137*.

[10] Bassett, "Nakedness," 236; Bergsma and Hahn, "Nakedness," 30–31; Isbell, "Curse," 5–6.

[11] The *hithpael* stem primarily conveys a reflexive-reciprocal sense of the *piel*; only secondarily

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20:11 includes the words שכב את ("lie with"), which are not used to describe Ham's activities in Gen 9:22.

The maternal-incest theory also imports three elements into the text itself. The first is the presence of Noah's wife in the story. The last time Genesis mentioned her was in 8:18 when she left the ark. Gen 9:18 conveniently describes a cast of characters, all of whom are mentioned by name in 9:20–27, but Noah's wife appears nowhere.[12] A second element imported into the story is the lapse of time between the events of 9:24 and 9:25. If Canaan were conceived because of Ham's actions, then many months must have passed between the events of 9:24 and the events of 9:25: Canaan must be born for Noah to curse him.[13] The narrative gives no clue that so much time has transpired. Third, the text never says that Canaan's mother was also his grandmother. The introduction of Ham as Canaan's father in 9:18, 22 opens the possibility that Ham began parenting Canaan before Ham ever saw his father's nakedness. Although the maternal incest theory initially appears to have several advantages, the connections between Gen 9:21–22 and Lev 18:7–8, 20:11a are inexact, and readers need to import much into the story for it to work.

Paternal Incest

Others argue that Ham commits incest with Noah. This argument rests largely on Lev 20:17, a text that condemns incest between a brother and sister by talking about their seeing (ראה) each other's nakedness (ערוה). Because Ham does see Noah's nakedness (וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו, 9:22), interpreters have suggested that Ham engages in a sexual act with his father.[14]

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is its sense passive (Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [trans. and rev. T. Muraoka; 2 vols.; SubBi 14; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991] 1:159 [§53i]; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 426–32 [§26]). While it thus is within the realm of possibility that Noah "was uncovered" (and not that he "uncovered himself"), this passive rendering would not be the primary sense of a *hithpael* verb, especially when גלה is attested in the *pual* stem (Nah 2:8 [7]; Prov 27:5). So Luis Alonso Schökel, *¿Dónde está tu hermano? Textos de fraternidad en el libro del Génesis* (Asociación Bíblica Española 19; Estella [Navarra], España: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1997) 49–50; Brad Embry, "The 'Naked Narrative' from Noah to Leviticus: Reassessing Voyeurism in the Account of Noah's Nakedness in Genesis 9.22–24," *JSOT* 35.4 (2011) 417–33, at 431–32; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC; Nashville, TN: B&H, 1996) 417; *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; Philadelphia: JPS, 1969) 80; Nicholas Odhiambo, "The Nature of Ham's Sin," *BSac* 170 (2013) 154–65, at 158; Rainey, "Exposure," 690–91; Reed, "Injustice," 93–94, 116; Gene Rice, "The Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18–27)," *JRT* 29 (1972) 5–27, at 12; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019) 116. Moreover, readers would not be inclined to give the verb a passive rendering when 9:20–21 sets the stage with Noah as the story's only active character.

[12] Some interpreters have argued that Noah's wife is alluded to in 9:21 when the text uses the suffixed noun אהלה, maintaining it refers to "her tent." However, Genesis uses אהלה multiple times, always in reference to "his tent," not "her tent" (12:8; 13:3; 35:21). For more on the third masculine singular suffix ה–, see Joüon, *Grammar*, 1:289 (§94h).

[13] Rainey, "Exposure," 688.

[14] Alter, *Moses*, 52–53; Bassett, "Nakedness," 233; Frankel, "Drunkenness," 64; Robert A. J.

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This approach has some of the advantages of the maternal incest theory, but it also has many of the same problems. Leviticus 20:17 speaks explicitly of a brother uncovering his sister's nakedness (ערות אחתו גלה), whereas (as noted above) Genesis talks of Noah uncovering himself. Additionally, Lev 20:17 employs the language of a brother taking (לקח) his sister, which is missing from Gen 9:20–27. Furthermore, there are several biblical texts that involve seeing nakedness without any reference to sexual contact (Exod 20:26 [cf. 28:42]; Deut 23:15 [14]; Isa 20:4 [cf. 2 Sam 10:4–5]).[15]

Genesis contains several episodes involving at least the potential for rape, incest, or something similar (19:5, 32–35; 29:23, 30; 34:2, 7; 35:22; 38:9, 16, 18; cf. 20:12).[16] However, unlike 9:22–23, the book never uses the language of seeing (ראה) nakedness (ערוה) to describe what transpires in these episodes.[17] The only other time that Genesis does speak of seeing nakedness is 42:9, 12, where Joseph falsely accuses his brothers of operating as "spies" (מרגלים) who want to see the land's nakedness, meaning parts of the land lacking fortifications or crops (on the latter, see Hos 2:11 [9]).[18] If Genesis 9 talks of seeing nakedness in the same way

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Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 64–71; Gershon Hepner, "The Depravity of Ham and the Tower of Babel Echo Contiguous Laws of the Holiness Code," *Estudios Bíblicos* 61 (2003) 85–131, at 95–97; Seth Daniel Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (JSOTSS 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 174; Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993) 119; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (trans. Kirsi Stjerna; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 52–53; O. Palmer Robertson, "Current Critical Questions Concerning the 'Curse of Ham' (Gen 9:20–27)," *JETS* 41 (1998) 177–88, 178–80; Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 65–76. See also the sources mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 98–100.

[15] Rainey, "Exposure," 676–79, 694; Reed, "Injustice," 115, 117; Walter Vogels, "Cham découvre les limites de son père Noé (Gn 9,20–27)," *NRTh* 109 (1987) 554–73, at 560.

[16] Interpreters debate whether Dinah was raped (as argued, e.g., by Susanne Scholz, "Was It Really Rape in Genesis 34? Biblical Scholarship as a Reflection of Cultural Assumptions," in *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible* [ed. Harold C. Washington, Susan Lochrie Graham, and Pamela Thimes; Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999] 182–98) or instead humiliated because an uncircumcised outsider has sex with her (see, e.g., Lyn M. Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? [Genesis 34]," *JSOT* 19.62 [1994] 19–36). Regarding Genesis 38, early audiences may not have understood incest to be in view (despite Lev 18:16; 20:21), given the practice of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10). Genesis 29:23, 30 is mentioned above because of Lev 18:18.

[17] Cf. Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 192; John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11* (LHBOTS 592; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015) 137–53, esp. 139. Given that Genesis was likely composed by many writers, it is possible that the book uses different language at different points to talk about the same subject matters. However, there is more likely to be continuity between Gen 9:22–23 and the rest of Genesis than Gen 9:22–23 and Leviticus (see Knust, "Afraid," 395; cf. Reed, "Injustice," 69).

[18] Although the spies of Num 21:32 appear to engage in violence (cf. 2 Sam 10:3 // 1 Chr 19:3), the verb רגל most frequently refers to visual reconnaissance: Deut 1:24; Josh 2:1; 6:22–23, 25; 7:2; 14:7; Judg 18:2, 14, 17; 1 Sam 26:4.

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as Genesis 42, then Ham is more likely to have spied his father's genitalia than to have had sex with him or his wife.[19]

Additionally, as many interpreters have pointed out, Gen 9:23 makes very little sense if 9:22 talks about incest.[20] The text's laconic style suddenly slows down and goes into significant detail, talking of Shem and Japheth not merely avoiding the sight of their naked father, but additionally of them taking clothing, setting it on their shoulders, walking backwards, and covering Noah with their faces turned away. Had the text merely stated that Shem and Japheth avoided seeing their father naked, then one could argue that such a statement means that they avoided engaging in incest. However, if euphemistic language here continues, then the elaborate detail becomes difficult to decipher. What could be the meaning of each of Shem and Japheth's actions? Some proponents of the theory that Ham sexually engages Noah or his mother have resorted to diachronic maneuvering to make sense of the text, arguing for example that 9:23 is a later addition written by a scribe who misunderstood the text.[21] Although Genesis likely came together through an exceptionally complex process involving many hands, it is worth asking whether one can make sense of the text as it stands. The short answer appears to be "yes."

The Shame of Nakedness

Although nakedness today is often associated with sexuality, it could carry a different set of connotations in the biblical world. It was linked to shame (Gen 2:25–3:11; Isa 20:4; Amos 2:16), poverty (Isa 58:7; Job 24:10), wailing (Mic 1:8), and death (Job 1:21; 26:6; Eccl 5:14 [15]).[22] Given these highly negative

[19] Reed, "Injustice," 115; Rice, "Curse," 11; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 61.

[20] Jan Christian Gertz, "Hams Südenfall und Kanaans Erbfluch: Anmerkungen zur kompositionsgeschichtlichen Stellung von Gen 9,18–29," in *'Gerechtigkeit und Recht zu üben' (Gen 18,19): Studien zur altorientalischen und biblischen Rechtsgeschichte, zur Religionsgeschichte Israels und zur Religionssoziologie; Festschrift für Eckart Otto zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009) 81–95, at 91; John Goldingay, *Genesis* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020) 169; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 323; Rainey, "Exposure," 687, 690; Vogels, "Cham," 560–61. Cf. Bailey, "Nothing," 134.

[21] Bassett, "Nakedness," 233–34. For a useful critique, see Reed, "Injustice," 117. Other explanations of 9:23 have been offered, though they have not gained great popularity. See Bergsma and Hahn, "Nakedness," 33, 39; Isbell, "Curse," 5; cf. Gagnon, *Homosexual*, 67; Robertson, "Questions," 180.

[22] Bergsma and Hahn claim that "the existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent . . . is otherwise unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature" ("Nakedness," 27). The biblical evidence here points to reasons why Noah would not take kindly to his nakedness being seen and publicized. Additionally, Mesopotamian sex omens suggest negative associations with a man's penis being stared at even in sexual situations (David M. Goldenberg, "What Did Ham Do to Noah?," in *"The Words of a Wise Man's Mouth Are Gracious" [Qoh 10,12]: Festschrift for Günther Stemberger on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* [ed. Mauro Perani; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005] 257–65; Ann Kessler Guinan, "Auguries of Hegemony: The Sex Omens of Mesopotamia," *Gender & History* 9 [1997] 462–79, esp. 466). Furthermore, the humiliating way in which ancient iconography depicts conquered people as naked further suggests stigmas around nakedness (see

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associations, one can understand why Japheth and Shem took a different course of action—and why Noah would have had a problem with Ham's behavior after learning what happened.[23] Rather than honor his father, Ham sees his father naked, fails to help him, and then publicizes his humiliating position.[24] Other ancient Near Eastern texts speak specifically about children caring for parents when they are drunk, and Isa 51:17–18 appears to allude to such a practice.[25]

The chief difficulty with this approach is understanding Noah's words in Gen 9:25–27. If Ham has castrated his father or committed incest, then Ham's actions would constitute a serious offence, and one could readily understand why Noah

Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* [HSM; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004] 160–63). For additional arguments against Bergsma and Hahn's position, see Rainey, "Exposure," 692.

[23] Some commentators translate 9:24b as, "[Noah] knew (ידע) what his . . . son had done to him (עשה־לו)." They then maintain that Ham must have done more than merely look at his father: otherwise, Noah would not have known what was done (e.g., Robertson, "Questions," 179). However, an equally plausible translation is, "[Noah] learned what his . . . son had done to him" (*HALOT*, s.v. ידע; cf. Esth 2:11; 4:1, 5). Presumably, Shem or Japheth informed Noah of Ham's disrespectful behavior, causing him to learn what had happened. Some have also suggested that the phrase "had done to him" (עשה־לו) refers to a bodily act (e.g., Gagnon, *Homosexual*, 65; Anthony Phillips, *Essays on Biblical Law* [JSOTSS 344; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002] 248; Marc Vervenne, "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor? A Critical Re-Examination of Genesis 9.20–27," *JSOT* 20.68 [1995] 33–55, at 50). However, Odhiambo points to several cases where this construction is present and there is no physical contact: Gen 12:18; 27:45; 29:25; Judg 8:1 ("Nature," 160; cf. Rainey, "Exposure," 693).

[24] I was initially persuaded of this position by Jordan Brown, "Usurping Noah's Masculinity: A Reexamination of Genesis 9:20–27" (paper presented at the Genesis Section of the Annual Meeting of the SBL, San Diego, CA, 23 November 2019). Other proponents of this sort of approach include: Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 112; Assohoto and Ngewa, "Genesis," 24–25; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011) 152–53; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992) 2:151; Day, *Creation*, 139; Cain Hope Felder, "Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 127–45, esp. 131; idem, "Racial Motifs in the Biblical Narratives," in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 172–88, at 175; Julie Galambush, *Reading Genesis: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018) 48–49; P. J. Harland, *The Value of Human Life: A Study of the Story of the Flood (Genesis 6–9)* (VTSup; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 56–57; Kruger, "Creation-Uncreation," 135*–37*; T. M. Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible," *JBL* 125 (2006) 225–41, at 233–34; Tremper Longman III, *Genesis* (Story of God Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) 134; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 419–20; Odhiambo, "Nature," 160–65; Rainey, "Exposure," esp. 685–87; Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* (trans. and annot. Charles B. Chavel; New York: Shiloh, 1971) 140–41; Reed, "Injustice," 120, 235–38; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 66; Steinmann, *Genesis*, 51; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987) 199; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (trans. John J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) 488; Vogels, "Cham," 562–70; Yamauchi, "Curse," 47. Cf. the sources mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 102–8.

[25] "'Ilu on a Toot," *The Context of Scripture* (ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; 4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997–2017) 1.97.304 (18–19); "The ʾAqhatu Legend," *COS* 1.103.344 (1.31).

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would wish that the offending party—or someone very close to him—become enslaved. But if all Ham did was see his father naked and tell his brothers, then Noah may be justified in becoming upset, but his decision to curse Ham's son repeatedly to the lowest form of slavery seems to be a serious overreaction, even if nakedness was humiliating. What should one make of Noah's curse—and the fact that it is not Ham but Canaan who receives it?

Noah's Curse and Its Recipient

To answer this question, it is helpful to review proposals around Noah's words in 9:25–27, which vary greatly. Many scholars approach the text diachronically.

A. Different Traditions about Noah's Sons

Some argue that the text reflects two traditions about Noah's sons, one where they are Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and another where they are Shem, Japheth, and Canaan. In this framework, 9:22 contains a later gloss trying to reconcile differences.[26] Thus, this portion of the text originally said, "Canaan saw his father's nakedness" (וירא כנען את ערות אביו). However, a scribe inserted "Ham, the father of" (חם אבי) directly before the word "Canaan," giving rise to the received text (וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו).[27]

This approach explains why Noah curses Canaan instead of Ham. It also makes sense of 9:24, where the perpetrator is called Noah's "littlest" son, which is often taken to mean his "youngest" son.[28] However, this approach offers little in terms of concrete evidence. There is no extant text wherein Canaan views Noah's

[26] Similarly, it is held that 9:18 originally lacked וחם הוא אבי כנען ("and Ham was the father of Canaan").

[27] Representatives of this sort of approach include Day, *Creation*, 140–41; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis with Introduction and Notes* (10th ed., London: Methuen, 1916) 111; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004) 1:319–674, esp. 403; Graves and Patai, *Myths*, 122; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 79; Thierry Murcia, "L'ivresse de Noé et la malédiction de Canaan: Status quaestionis et nouvelles investigations," *Judaïsme Ancien* 7 (2019) 119–32, esp. 131–32; Rice, "Curse," 6–8; John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: WJK, 1992) 179; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 135–36. See also the sources supporting this position listed in Rice, "Curse," 8–9; Reed, "Injustice," 13 n. 24. Frankel argues that the story originally involved Canaan seeing Ham naked and lacked 9:22b–23, 26–27 ("Drunkenness," 49–68). While the author does excellent work making individual arguments, in the end, he proposes an original story that is rather far removed from the received text—and therefore much more speculative than other proposals.

[28] Ham is always mentioned second in the lists of Noah's sons (5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18; 10:1). If Ham's position in these lists aligns with his birth order, and if הקטן means "the youngest," then Ham must not be the perpetrator in 9:24. However, names can be listed in ways other than birth order (e.g., Gen 25:9; see Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:164–65). Furthermore, הקטן could refer to size as in Genesis's first use of the word in 1:16. See also J. Hoftijzer, "Some Remarks to the Tale of Noah's Drunkenness," in *Studies on the Book of Genesis* (OtSt 12; Leiden: Brill, 1958) 22–27, at 23–24; cf. Reed, "Injustice," 122–25.

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nakedness. Genesis consistently presents Ham—not Canaan—as the brother of Shem and Japheth (5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18; 10:1).[29] There is insufficient evidence within Genesis that Canaan was once considered a direct son of Noah.

B. Justification for Canaanite Enslavement

Another diachronic approach argues that the text originally cursed Ham in 9:25–27, but later editors modified Noah's words to involve Canaan as a way of justifying Canaanite enslavement.[30] In support of this claim, there is ample evidence of biblical writers and editors who thought negatively of the Canaanites.[31]

However, it is unclear why an anti-Canaanite editor would have changed "Ham" to "Canaan" in 9:25–27, but not in 9:22, where the transgression against Noah occurs.[32] One could similarly ask why a poorly edited text would merit continual copying, preservation, and canonization from antiquity to the present day.[33]

C. Other Approaches

Other interpreters have attempted to explain why Noah's curse falls on Canaan without reconstructing previous forms of the book. Some of these approaches are more convincing than others.[34] One of the most persuasive explanations stems from the observation that some biblical texts take cross-generational punishment as an established way that God works (e.g., Exod 34:7). Similar logic may be at work in Noah's mind.[35]

[29] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 197.

[30] Jason Bembry, "Justifying Slavery via Genesis 9:20–27: The Vicious Legacy of Racist Interpretation of the Bible," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 23 (2020) 69–82, at 71; Felder, "Motifs," 175; Fretheim, "Genesis," 403. See also the sources listed in Reed, "Injustice," 16 n. 34.

[31] See texts mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 34.

[32] Rice, "Curse," 10.

[33] Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 201.

[34] A less convincing explanation is that Noah could not curse Ham because God blessed Ham in 9:1 (4Q252 II, 7; Gen. Rab. 36.7; Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001] 150; see also the sources mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 126 n. 149). Genesis 12:2–3 makes clear that people can curse those whom God blesses. Another suggestion is that Canaan was present with his father as an accessory to the crime (Gen. Rab. 36.7; Longman, *Genesis*, 134–35; Sarna, *Genesis*, 66). The narrator, however, never tells readers that Canaan is present in 9:22.

[35] Goldingay, *Genesis*, 170; Robertson, "Questions," 181; see also the sources mentioned in Reed, "Injustice," 126 n. 146. Similar proposals are made by: Yitzhak Avishur, "Noah's Drunkenness and the Behavior of His Sons (Genesis 9: 18–27)," in *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center, 1999) 41–56, at 50; Lloyd R. Bailey, *Noah: The Person and the Story in History and Tradition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) 161; Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:154–55; Peter Enns and Jared Byas, *Genesis for Normal People* (2nd ed.; n.p.: The Bible for Normal People, 2019) 84–86; Fretheim, "Genesis," 404; Galambush, *Genesis*, 48–49; Leon R. Kass, "Seeing the Nakedness of His Father," *Commentary* 93.6 (1992) 41–47, at 45; Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Kidner Classic Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008) 111; Knust, "Afraid," 396–97; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 417–18, 421–22; Rainey, "Exposure," 688; Reed, "Injustice," 128–30; Ross, "Curse," 233–35; Wenham,

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This approach makes sense to a point, but a question remains: does Noah's cursing Canaan to the lowest form of slavery actually fit the crime? Obviously, if Ham had forced castration or committed incest, then such a consequence would make sense. But as we have seen above, the connections with castration and incest are tenuous.

Within a culture where nakedness was shameful and children were expected to care for drunk parents, one can understand why Noah is upset. Even so, Noah's expressions of anger do not appear commensurate with the offence. Ham must have found it curious when his own father was unclothed. He tells his brothers. Does that action merit Ham having his son condemned to the lowest form of slavery? Many interpreters think not.[36] As Benno Jacob puts it, Noah's extreme animosity toward his own grandchild is "incomprehensible."[37]

Noah's Wine and His Curse

Noah's actions are incomprehensible—until one considers the possibility that Noah is either still drunk or else hungover when he speaks in 9:25–27. African American interpreters repeatedly interpret the text in this way. People of African descent are not the only ones to see Noah's curse as related to alcohol,[38] and this approach is not embraced by all African Americans.[39] Nevertheless, one can trace the presence

Genesis 1–15, 201; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 484; Yamauchi, "Curse," 48.

[36] Enns and Byas, *Genesis*, 84; William McKee Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the 'Sons of Ham,'" *The American Historical Review* 85 (1980) 15–43, at 15–16; Fretheim, "Genesis," 404; Reed, "Injustice," e.g., 111, 120, 258–61, 268, 274; West, *Genesis*, 71; John H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 350.

[37] Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible, Genesis* (trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob; augm. ed.; Brooklyn, NY: KTAV, 2007) 68.

[38] Some interpreters outside of African American traditions have also entertained the idea that Noah is under alcohol's influence when speaking. However, when this idea is mentioned, it is not typically developed as a solution to all of the passage's interpretive difficulties. See Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 17; Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham, "Noah's Nakedness: Islam, Race, and the Fantasy of the Christian West," in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture* (ed. Roberta Sterman Sabbath; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 461–73, esp. 463; Henry St. John Bolingbroke, *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (4 vols.; Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1841) 2:209; Chas. Carroll, *"The Negro a Beast" . . . or . . . "In the Image of God"* (St. Louis: American Book and Bible, 1900) 77, 80 (beware that this work is filled with racist thinking); Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Genesis," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism and URJ Press, 2008) 1–302, at 46; Jack Finegan, *In the Beginning: A Journey through Genesis* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 58; Goldingay, *Genesis*, 171; Haynes, *Curse*, 217 (cf. 196–200); Knust, "Afraid," 409 n. 66; Alicia Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 44; Wongi Park, "The Blessing of Whiteness in the Curse of Ham: Reading Gen 9:18–29 in the Antebellum South," *Religions* 12.11 (2021) 1–18, at 11; Bowman Stephenson, *Noah's Drunkenness: A Sermon* (n.p., 1868) 13.

[39] Another approach taken by people of African descent is to argue that Noah's words were fulfilled in ancient times and therefore do not relate to more recent slavery (see Jeremy Schipper, "'If the

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of this interpretive tradition among Black communities from abolitionist writers to the present day.

St. Clair Drake has suggested that prior to any known writing, African Americans preached that Noah's curse was invalid because he was drunk.[40] The clearest evidence, however, begins with abolitionists' writings prior to the American Civil War. In 1841, James W. C. Pennington argues that Noah's words lack divine support, urging readers not to confuse "the spirit of wine" with "the spirit of God."[41] In 1855, Samuel Ringgold Ward similarly casts doubt on the inspiration of Noah's words, writing: "I know that 'cursed be Canaan' is sometimes quoted as if it came from the lips of God; although . . . these are but the words of a newly awakened drunken man. There was about as much inspiration in these words, as there might have been in anything said by Lot on two very disgraceful nights in his existence."[42] This theme of Noah's words lacking divine inspiration because of his drunkenness appears again in 1859 in the writings of an anonymous contributor (called "S. S. N.") in *The Anglo-African Magazine*: "Noah was no prophet, and had no right, after a drunken carousal, to curse anything, except the wine that had fuddled him."[43]

Echoing these abolitionists in 1883, George Washington Williams summarizes Noah's words in 9:25–27 before writing: "And all this was done without any inspiration. He simply expressed himself as a fallible man."[44] In the same

Scriptures are True': Thomas Clarkson on Noah's Curse," in *Guide Me into Your Truth: Essays in Honor of Dennis T. Olson* [ed. Rolf A. Jacobson, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, and Kristin J. Wendland; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023] 23–31). Perhaps the most popular approach taken by African Americans is to note that Noah's curse falls on Canaan (who is not associated with Africa), rather than Ham's other sons (who are associated with Africa). See, e.g., Edward W. Blyden, *The Negro in Ancient History* (Washington: M'Gill & Witherow, 1869) 23; Alexander Crummell, *The Negro Race Not Under a Curse: An Examination of Genesis IX. 25* (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, & Hunt, [1853]) 9, 15; George Alexander McGuire, *Universal Negro Catechism: A Course of Instruction in Religious and Historical Knowledge Pertaining to the Race* (n.p.: Universal Negro Improvement Association, 1921) 7; James W. C. Pennington, *A Text Book of the Origin and History, &c. &c. of the Colored People* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1841) 14–17; Talbert W. Swan, *No More Cursing: Destroying the Roots of Religious Racism* (Indian Orchard, MA: Trumpet in Zion, 2003) 62–68; B. T. Tanner, *The Negro's Origin: And Is the Negro Cursed?* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers, 1869) 25–38; H. M. Turner, *The Negro in All Ages* (Savannah: D. G. Patton, 1873) 18–20. Some of these 19th-cent. sources are helpfully interpreted in Jeremy Schipper, "The Blessing of Ham: Genesis 9:1 in Early African American Biblical Scholarship," *BibInt* 30 (2022) 399–414.

[40] St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: Third World, 1970) 47–48.

[41] Pennington, *Text Book*, 17–18.

[42] Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (London: John Snow, 1855) 270–71.

[43] S. S. N., "Anglo-Saxons, and Anglo-Africans," *The Anglo-African Magazine* 1 (1859) 247–59, at 248. A similar treatment of Gen 9:20–27 is found in the abolitionist publication J. L. Stone, *Slavery and the Bible; or, Slavery Seen as Its Punishment* (San Francisco: B. F. Sterett, 1863) 12.

[44] George W. Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens; Together with a Preliminary Consideration of the Unity of the Human Family, an Historical Sketch of Africa, and an Account of the Negro Governments of Sierra Leone and Liberia* (2 vols.; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1883) 1:7–8.

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publication, he calls Noah's curse "the bitter expression of a drunken and humiliated parent lacking divine authority."[45] Before ending his work, Williams equates Noah's words with "the denunciations of an irritated father just awaking from his drunkenness."[46]

This interpretation also surfaces in the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston's 1927 play "The First One" repeatedly stresses that Noah curses Ham while drunk. As soon as Noah's wife learns of the curse, she calls Noah a "drunkard" before crying out, "Oh water, Shem! Japheth! Cold water to drive out the wine. Noah! (*She sobs.*) Thou must awaken and unsay thy curse. Thou must! (*She is sobbing and rousing him.*)" Soon, Ham's wife learns of Noah's words. Her reaction: "But Noah is drunk—surely Jehovah hears not a drunken curse. Noah would not curse Ham if he knew. . . . Oh, wake thou (*She shrieks*) and uncurse thy curse." The cast wails, sobs, prays, and begs God not to let the drunken curse come into effect.[47]

Like these predecessors, Martin Luther King, Jr. also understands alcohol to directly influence Noah's curse. In an address in 1957, he shares that the Bible "tells us that before Noah pronounced the curse, he was drunk, and when he did pronounce it he had a hangover. . . . Although God can work in divers[e] ways and divers[e] manners, I don't think He will entrust anything that important to a man with a hangover."[48] For King, Noah's words cannot be divine prophecies. They are not just human words but hungover words.

In more recent times, Talbert W. Swan and Rodney Sadler continue this focus on the relationship between Noah's drunkenness and curse. Countering the tendency to equate Noah's words with prophecy, Swan writes: "Despite the description of Noah as a 'blameless' man, the fact remains that he was in a drunken state [when cursing] and that the text gives no indication that he was acting as an agent for God."[49] Sadler makes similar points: "It is often overlooked that YHWH never uttered or authorized the curse against Ham; an inebriated Noah did. It is surprising how much harm to African Americans and 'race' relations has been caused by the attribution of theological significance to the recorded ramblings of a human being in the throes of intoxication."[50]

[45] Ibid., 1:10.

[46] Ibid., 1:445.

[47] Zora Neale Hurston, "The First One (1927)," in *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays* (ed. Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008) 63–74, esp. 69–72.

[48] Martin Luther King, Jr., "'Some Things We Must Do,' Address Delivered at the Second Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 Dec 1957, Montgomery, Ala.," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (ed. Clayborne Carson; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 4:328–43, at 335. A year later, Everett Tilson (a Caucasian who advocated for racial justice alongside King) published similar remarks in *Segregation and the Bible: A Searching Analysis of the Scriptural Evidence* (New York: Abingdon, 1958) 24.

[49] Swan, *Cursing*, 71, cf. 74.

[50] Rodney S. Sadler, "Can a Cushite Change His Skin? Cushites, 'Racial Othering,' and the Hebrew Bible," *Int* 60 (2006) 386–403, at 392; see also idem, "Genesis," in *Fortress Commentary*

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One can easily see how this sort of interpretation cuts against the most insidious uses of Gen 9:20–27. If Noah is a rambling drunk, then making much of his words is pure foolishness. This interpretation not only works well on a social level, countering racist justifications for oppression. It also works well on a narrative level, offering a better way of understanding Genesis as it stands.

Clinical Descriptions of Drunkenness

Everything the text says about Noah in 9:21–27 matches clinical descriptions of alcohol intoxication. In particular, he displays signs of disinhibition, sleepiness, aggressiveness, confusion, and emotional instability—all of which align with textbook definitions of drunkenness.

After the text says that Noah drank wine and became drunk (וישת מן־היין וישכר, 9:21), it gives a clear sign that his inhibitions are decreased, an extremely common characteristic of alcohol intoxication, even at low levels.[51] The text says that he undressed himself (ויתגל, 9:21). As described above, nakedness carries many negative associations within the Bible and ancient Near Eastern sources. Against

on the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha (ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 89–136, at 101. Across the Atlantic, Barnabe Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa make similar points ("Genesis," in *Africa Bible Commentary* [ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006] 9–84, at 25). Reed and Mbuvi join Sadler and others in faulting Noah's drunkenness, but do not emphasize the role of alcohol in Noah's curses (Reed, "Injustice," 85–90, 274; Mbuvi, *Belonging*, 65 n. 66).

[51] John C. M. Brust, "Alcoholism," in *Current Diagnosis and Treatment: Neurology* (3rd ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2019), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=2567&sectionid=207242254; Kurt M. Dubowski, "Alcohol Determination in the Clinical Laboratory," *American Journal of Clinical Pathology* 74 (1980) 747–50, at 749; Peter R. Martin, "Substance Related and Addictive Disorders," in *Current Diagnosis & Treatment: Psychiatry* (ed. M. H. Ebert, J. F. Leckman, and I. L. Petrakis; 3rd ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2019), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=2509&sectionid=200808792; Ernest Murray, Leon Walthall, Kristin R. Wise, "Drug Overdose and Withdrawal," in *Principles and Practice of Hospital Medicine* (ed. Sylvia C. McKean et al.; 2nd ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2017), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=1872&sectionid=146990585; Kristin S. Raj, Nolan Williams, and Charles DeBattista, "Alcohol Use Disorder (Alcoholism)," *Current Medical Diagnosis & Treatment 2022* (ed.. M. A. Papadakis et al.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2022), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=3081&sectionid=258974214; Marc A. Schuckit, "Alcohol and Alcohol Use Disorders," *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine* (ed. J. Loscalzo et al.; 21st ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2022), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=3095&sectionid=265468497; cf. American Psychiatric Association, "Alcohol Intoxication," in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (5th ed.; Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013) 497–99. Ancient Near Eastern sources similarly show alcohol decreasing inhibitions. For example, the Turin Judicial Papyrus talks of a drunken carousal playing a role in officers (including the commander of the army) joining the harem conspiracy against Ramses III (*COS* 3.8.27–30). In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu's mood becomes free, which leads to singing after he drinks seven jugs of ale (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* [trans. Andrew George; 2nd ed.; Penguin Classics; London: Penguin, 2020] 13, 170 [lines 100–5 of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania tablet]).

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that cultural milieu, Noah's inhibitions appear weakened as he strips naked and remains that way.

Next, he enters into a stupor, falls asleep, or passes out, which is evidenced both by his inaction amid his sons entering the tent and especially by the notation that he awakes (ויקץ) in 9:24. Such activity aligns with clinical descriptions of alcohol intoxication, which speak of somnolence, drowsiness, sleep, stupors, and comas.[52]

After gaining consciousness, Noah opens his mouth. The individual previously described as "righteous" (6:9; 7:1) is now filled with aggression. He repeatedly curses Canaan (9:25–27). Textbook descriptions of alcohol intoxication speak repeatedly of confusion and impaired judgement that often accompanies aggression and anger, increasing the risk of conflict with others.[53] In the Bible, cursing can be an expression of aggression closely related to anger.[54] Noah's decision to use curses represents a serious overreaction, difficult to explain aside from alcohol's effects. Furthermore, his actions are destructive, not just to his relationships with Ham and Canaan, but also to himself. Genesis testifies to the power of one's name living on through one's descendants (48:16).[55] Given this view of offspring (and perhaps the afterlife), Noah's curse of his grandson is pure foolishness, one of the most foolish acts in Genesis. As Amanda Beckenstein Mbuvi astutely puts it, "in cursing his own seed Noah curses himself."[56] Like too many people who have had too much to drink, Noah acts in ways that endanger himself, his family, and his future.

[52] American Psychiatric Association, "Intoxication," 497; Brust, "Alcoholism"; Dubowski, "Alcohol," 749; Martin, "Addictive Disorders"; Murray, Walthall, and Wise, "Drug Overdose"; James H. Nichols, Nicola J. Rutherford, and Michael Laposata, "Toxicology," in *Laposata's Laboratory Medicine: Diagnosis of Disease in the Clinical Laboratory* (ed. Michael Laposata; 3rd ed.; New York: McGraw Hill: 2019), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=2503&sectionid=201362131; Raj, Williams, and DeBattista, "Alcohol"; Schuckit, "Alcohol." Ancient Near Eastern literature depicts ʾIlu as so drunk that he becomes like one who is dead ("ʾIlu on a Toot," *COS* 1.97.304 [21–22]).

[53] American Psychiatric Association, "Alcohol Intoxication," 497; Brust, "Alcoholism"; Dubowski, "Alcohol," 749; Martin, "Addictive Disorders"; Murray, Walthall, and Wise, "Drug Overdose"; Mayo Clinic Staff, "Alcohol Use Disorder," *Mayo Clinic*, 11 July 2018, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alcohol-use-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20369243; Mayo Clinic Staff, "Hangovers," *Mayo Clinic*, 16 December 2017, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hangovers/symptoms-causes/syc-20373012; Raj, Williams, and DeBattista, "Alcohol"; Derek D. Satre et al., "Unhealthy Alcohol & Other Substance Use," in *Behavioral Medicine: A Guide for Clinical Practice* (ed. Mitchell D. Feldman et al.; 5th ed.; New York: McGraw Hill, 2019), https://accessmedicine.mhmedical.com/content.aspx?bookid=2747&sectionid=230250283; Schuckit, "Alcohol." See also "Alcohol," in *Black's Medical Dictionary* (ed. Harvey Marcovitch; 43rd ed.; London: A&C Black, 2018), https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/blackmed/alcohol/0. One sees alcohol's influence in the expression of emotion elsewhere in the Bible. For example, in Genesis 21 Sarah likely comes under alcohol's influence at the celebration of Isaac's weaning (so Carey Ellen Walsh, "Under the Influence: Trust and Risk in Biblical Family Drinking," *JSOT* 25.90 [2000] 13–29, at 22–23). In that context, she becomes upset, which leads to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.

[54] B. Wiklander, "צחק," *TDOT* 4.106–11, at 107.

[55] Joseph A. Grassi, "Child, Children," *ABD* 1:904–7, at 904.

[56] Amanda Beckenstein Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis: Biblical Israel and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 66.

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Another hallmark of intoxication is confusion, often involving memory problems.[57] Noah is clearly confused in 9:25–27. He curses his own innocent grandchild, rather than the responsible party. Even after he learns who saw him (9:24), he fails to remember who that person is. Or, his curses reflect someone who cannot concentrate enough to keep the names of his offspring straight.

A final mark of intoxication in this text is emotional instability (often called "lability" in medical literature).[58] One would be hard pressed to find a better example of someone engaged in emotional mood swings than Noah, whose speech begins by cursing Canaan to abject slavery (9:25), then switches to a doxology exuberantly praising God (9:26ab), then reverts to cursing Canaan again (9:26c), and then speaks positively of Japheth (9:27ab), all before cursing Canaan yet again (9:27c).[59] He clearly has trouble staying on topic, much like a drunk whose words launch off on wild tangents that connect to the topic at hand only in the mind of the speaker.

Noah thus acts intoxicated not only in 9:21–24, but also when he speaks in 9:25–27. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (often called the *DSM-5*) offers clear criteria for determining when a patient is under the influence of alcohol. It states: "The essential feature of alcohol intoxication is the presence

[57] American Psychiatric Association, "Alcohol Intoxication," 497–98; Brust, "Alcoholism"; Dubowski, "Alcohol," 749; "Alcohol" (ed. Marcovitch); Martin, "Addictive Disorders"; Mayo Clinic Staff, "Alcohol Use Disorder"; Mayo Clinic Staff, "Hangovers"; Murray, Walthall, and Wise, "Drug Overdose"; Nichols, Rutherford, and Laposata, "Toxicology"; Raj, Williams, and DeBattista, "Alcohol"; Satre et al., "Alcohol"; Schuckit, "Alcohol." Elsewhere, Genesis portrays Jacob as unable to distinguish between Leah and Rachel on his wedding night, another case where alcohol likely leads to confusion (Gen 29:23–25; Walsh, "Influence," 26–27). In Egyptian literature, one finds alcohol leading to confusion or at least the inability to carry out a task. In "The Destruction of Mankind," (part of "The Book of the Cow of Heaven"), a goddess sets out to destroy humanity but instead becomes drunk and fails even to perceive humanity (*COS* 1.24.37).

[58] American Psychiatric Association, "Alcohol Intoxication," 497; Brust, "Alcoholism"; Dubowski, "Alcohol," 749; "Alcohol" (ed. Marcovitch); Mayo Clinic Staff, "Alcohol Use Disorder"; Mayo Clinic Staff, "Hangovers"; Murray, Walthall, and Wise, "Drug Overdose"; Raj, Williams, and DeBattista, "Alcohol"; Satre, et al., "Alcohol."

[59] When curses and blessings follow each other in the Bible (e.g., Deut 28), the one making the pronouncement typically curses and blesses different humans, not some humans and God. Some interpreters maintain that by blessing a people's deity, a person blesses the people (e.g., Gunkel, *Genesis*, 81). However, evidence is lacking. John Day argues that in Deut 33:20, God is blessed rather than the expected tribe—and that there thus is a precedent for a blessing going to a party's deity rather than the party itself (*Creation*, 142). However, Deut 33:20 is open to different interpretations. It blesses one who enlarges Gad (ברוך מרחיב גד), which could include God but does not need to. Some even translate the verse as, "Blessed be the enlargement of Gad" (ברוך מרחב גד; NRSV^{UE}; cf. CEB). Furthermore, while it is natural to associate YHWH with Israel (the prototypical descendants of Shem), Genesis presents other peoples, many of whom do not worship YHWH, as also descending from Shem (Rice, "Curse," 14). Some interpreters suspect that Noah actually says, "May Shem be blessed by YHWH my God" (cf. NRSV^{UE}; Alonso Schökel, *Hermano*, 46–47; for an overview of other emendations, see Gunkel, *Genesis*, 81). While that rendering is a valid translation of the consonantal text that suggests more coherence in Noah's words, it does not match the Masoretic pointing and disagrees with ancient versions. (Furthermore, a more common way to talk of someone as blessed by YHWH would be with the ל-particle [ברוך . . . ליהוה, as in Judg 17:2; 1 Sam 15:13; 23:21; 2 Sam 2:5; Ruth 2:20; 3:10], which is missing from Gen 9:26.)

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of clinically significant problematic behavioral or psychological changes (e.g., inappropriate sexual or aggressive behavior, mood lability, impaired judgment, impaired social or occupational functioning) that develop during, or shortly after, alcohol ingestion. . . . These changes are accompanied by evidence of impaired functioning and judgment."[60] Long before the American Psychiatric Association developed this characterization of intoxication, Genesis portrayed Noah with problematic behavior, psychological changes, "aggressive behavior, mood lability, impaired judgment," and "impaired . . . functioning." All of Noah's actions suggest that alcohol has deranged an otherwise upright individual.

Possible Objections

One could object to this line of interpretation by arguing that when 9:24 talks of Noah awaking from his wine (וייקץ נח מיינו), it talks of his becoming sober.[61] He thus would be clear-headed by the time he begins speaking in 9:25. The evidence in favor of this interpretation is not compelling. Most frequently, the verb for awakening (קיץ/יקץ) refers to gaining consciousness after sleeping.[62] At times, the Bible uses this verb to talk about those suffering the effects of alcohol (Ps 78:65; Prov 23:29–35; cf. Jer 51:39, 57; Joel 1:5). However, in these cases, some sort of sleep or loss of consciousness is at least implied, so readers cannot be sure whether the texts talk about "awakening" to describe merely regaining consciousness or additionally regaining sobriety.[63] With Noah most likely unconscious, talk of awakening from wine probably means regaining consciousness, not becoming lucid.

A second possible objection is that Noah's words must function etiologically, given how frequently Genesis provides etiologies.[64] Genesis certainly has its fair

[60] American Psychiatric Association, "Alcohol Intoxication," 497.

[61] Gen. Rab. 36.7; Sarna, *Genesis*, 66; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 489.

[62] Gen 28:16; 41:4, 7, 21; Judg 16:14, 20; 1 Sam 26:12; 1 Kgs 3:15; 18:27; Isa 29:8; Jer 31:26; Ps 3:6 [5]; 73:20; Prov 6:22. Cf. G. Wallis, "יקץ; קיץ," *TDOT*, 6:274–79.

[63] Jer 51:39, 57 and Ps 78:65 explicitly mention being asleep (ישן). Prov 23:29–35 talks about lying down (שכב, 23:34). Joel 1:5 implies that the drunkards have been sleeping or passed out, unaware of the massive locust invasion (1:4). Wallis interprets these verses as referring to regaining consciousness from alcohol-induced sleep, not gaining full sobriety (*TDOT*, 6:276).

[64] Language of etiology is found in Bailey, *Noah*, 159–61; Felder, "Race," 130; Fretheim, "Genesis," 403–5; Gagnon, *Homosexual*, 67; Goldenberg, *Black*, e.g., 1; idem, *Curse*, 98; Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1–25A* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018) 155; Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville: WJK, 2016) 84; Rice, "Curse," 13–14; von Rad, *Genesis*, 137–38. Sources explicitly linking Noah to prophecy include Driver, *Genesis*, 111; Fleming, *Genesis*, 116–19; Kidner, *Genesis*, 111–12; Robertson, "Questions," 185; Ross, "Curse," 224, 231–35; von Rad, *Genesis*, 137–38; see also sources discussed in Park, "Blessing," 9–11. In addition to seeing Noah's words as etiological or prophetic, there is a problematic tendency to presume the guilt of Canaan, Ham, or others seen as related in some way to Canaan or Ham. Justin Reed's excellent dissertation examines precisely this issue ("Injustice"). Its publication by Oxford University Press will likely transform the way scholars understand this text.

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share of etiologies.[65] However, interpreters do well to heed Carol Newsom's words about genre: "rather than referring to texts as belonging to genres one might think of texts as participating in them, invoking them, gesturing to them, playing in and out of them, and in so doing, continually changing them."[66] Rather than assuming that Gen 9:25–27 is a simple etiology that explains how things came to be, readers can ask, "How do the words of this text—spoken by someone who recently had far too much to drink—evoke etiological frameworks without necessarily operating the way that etiologies prototypically do? Is it possible that human frailty can distort even revered customs like the bestowal of an ancestor's wishes near the end of life?" Understanding the complex ways that genre can function—and reckoning seriously with Noah's behavior—requires that interpreters pause before assuming that Noah's words are yet another explanation of how things came to be.

After all, when it comes to matters of ethnicity, identity, and Israel's relationships with its neighbors, thought in Genesis can be rather complex. While non-Israelites can be portrayed negatively, the book also portrays Canaanites positively, whether one think of Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham (14:18–20), Abimelech's honorable dealings with Abraham and Sarah (20:1–18), or Ephron's generous offer and later sale of land (23:1–20).[67] Given that Genesis includes at least some positive thought about Canaanites, one should be reticent to assume that the book simplistically sees them as damned to future slavery.

Parts of Genesis point to a fulfillment of Noah's curse, but other parts do not. On the one hand, Genesis envisions a future where the land of Canaan will be given to Abraham's descendants (e.g., 15:16–21; 17:8; 48:4). Genesis 14 may describe at least a partial fulfillment of Noah's curse: various Canaanite cities are said to serve King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Elam was one of Shem's sons (10:15–19, 22; 14:1–4).[68] Moreover, other biblical books do contain some references to Canaanite slavery (Josh 9:23; 16:10; Judg 1:28–35; 1 Kgs 9:20–21).

On the other hand, the primary emphasis in books like Genesis and Joshua is not on the Canaanites becoming enslaved, but on their extermination and land

[65] See, e.g., Gen 19:37–38; 22:14; 26:33; 32:33 [32]; 35:20; 47:26.

[66] Carol A. Newsom, "Spying out the Land: A Report from Genology," in *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies* (ed. Roland Boer; SemeiaSt; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007) 19–30, at 21.

[67] Robert L. Cohn, "Negotiating [with] the Natives: Ancestors and Identity in Genesis," *HTR* 96 (2003) 147–66, at 166; Fredrick Carlson Holmgren, "Looking Back on Abraham's Encounter with a Canaanite King: A Reversal of Expectations (Genesis 20:1–18)," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010) 366–77; Joel S. Kaminsky, "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?," *HTR* 96 (2003) 397–425, esp. 402; Reed, "Injustice," esp. 33–35; A. van Selms, "The Canaanites in the Book of Genesis," in *Studies on the Book of Genesis* (OtSt 12; Leiden: Brill, 1958) 182–213, esp. 204–12; Gerald West, *Genesis*, 71. See also Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2000), which argues that Genesis has been edited to include inclusive views toward foreigners that undermine exclusivist views.

[68] Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:168; Iain Provan, *Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Discovering Biblical Texts; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 165; Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: WJK, 1991) 146.

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possession—which Noah never mentions.[69] Deuteronomy 20:10–18 (cf. 7:1–5) makes things exceedingly clear: peoples far away from the Israelites can become enslaved, but *not* the Canaanites.[70] Many suggest that the language of slavery in Genesis is a metaphor for subjugation, but it seems odd that Noah would talk metaphorically about Canaan being delegated to the very role Canaanites are literally forbidden from becoming elsewhere in the Bible.[71] Genesis's content does not always perfectly align with Deuteronomy's content, but Deuteronomy's key concern should not be ignored.[72] Interpreters certainly do well to remember Steven McKenzie's words: "There was never any full-scale enslavement of Canaanites by Israel."[73]

Furthermore, the immediate literary context of Genesis gives reasons to suspect that God and the narrator may not agree with Noah's curse.[74] Within the story of Noah, God is now reluctant to curse (8:21) and instead blesses members of Noah's family (9:1). God will soon talk about blessing all of the earth's families in 12:3, so there is reason to pause before automatically assuming that God here agrees with Noah's desire that one of these families becomes cursed. Slavery frequently entails violence, and the God of the Noah narratives opposes violence repeatedly (6:11, 13 and 9:5–6).[75] Noah's only words promote harm, introducing human cursing, slavery,

[69] Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 493. See also Assohoto and Ngewa, "Genesis," 25; Katell Berthelot, "The Original Sin of the Canaanites," in *The 'Other' in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins* (ed. Daniel C. Harlow et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 49–66, esp. 50–51. Cf. Williams, *History*, 1:10, 445. Obviously, there are differences in how pentateuchal sources understand the fate of the Canaanites (see, e.g., Baruch J. Schwartz, "Reexamining the Fate of the 'Canaanites' in the Torah Traditions," *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism* [ed. Chaim Cohen, Avi M. Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004] 151–70). However, in none of these sources is wholesale enslavement of Canaanites a prominent idea or theme.

[70] Similarly, Joshua 9 takes pains to describe the Gibeonites as quite exceptional among the Canaanites: they are *not* like the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites who gather to fight against Joshua and Israel (9:1–3).

[71] Furthermore, as Benno Jacob observes, "this curse is never later quoted as justification for hatred against Canaanites" (*Genesis*, 70).

[72] As Shemaryahu Talmon ("The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," in *Congress Volume: Göttingen 1977* [eds. J. A. Emerton et al.; Vetus Testamentum, Supplements 29; Leiden: Brill, 1978] 320–55) points out, texts in the Hebrew Bible are closer to each other than to other ancient Near Eastern texts, given their linguistic, geographical, and temporal proximity.

[73] Steven L. McKenzie, *All God's Children: A Biblical Critique of Racism* (Louisville: WJK, 1997) 10.

[74] Rather than seeing Noah's curses and blessings as unleashing magical powers that must come to fulfillment in the future, one can understand his speech as having an optative and jussive force, expressing what he wants to see happen in the future (Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 324; Jacob, *Genesis*, 69; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 422).

[75] Genesis 6:11–13 uses the Hebrew word חמס. Some have objected to translating this word as "violence," arguing that it refers more generally to a lack of righteousness (e.g., Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:52). However, bloodshed is certainly a common type of "unrighteousness" encompassed within the word (Judg 9:24; Jer 22:3; 51:35; Ezek 7:23; Joel 4:19 [3:19]; Hab 2:8, 17; Ps 72:14).

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and inequality. So, it may not be coincidental that Genesis's next story involves God placing limits on human speech (11:1–9).[76] Later in Genesis and Exodus, Shem's descendants become enslaved or at least servants to Ham's descendants—a reversal of what Noah wants to see happen (Gen 47:3–4; Exod 1:11–14). When one looks at Genesis and beyond, therefore, the overarching narrative does not present a simple fulfillment of Noah's words about Canaan becoming a slave.

It is likewise difficult to discern how Noah's words about Japheth reach fulfillment. After employing a pun wishing that God would enlarge Japheth (יפת אלהים ליפת, 9:27),[77] Noah then expresses his hopes that: 1) Japheth will inhabit the tents of Shem (וישכן באהלי־שם) and 2) Canaan will become enslaved to Japheth. Noah's words about Japheth dwelling in Shem's tents can be taken as hoping that Japheth's descendants will "displace" Shem's descendants (so Ps 78:55; 1 Chr 5:10; cf. Job 18:14–15) or perhaps that the two groups will form a friendly alliance and comingle in the same tents (cf. Ps 15:1; 78:60; Job 11:14).[78] Historically, it is difficult to find a point in time when Japheth's descendants either displaced or entered into a friendly relationship with Shem's descendants while simultaneously enslaving Canaan's descendants.[79] Many scholars have speculated about what Noah may be talking about, but few proposals have gained widespread consensus.[80] Japheth is sometimes taken to represent the Philistines, Phoenicians, or Hittites, but the next chapter of Genesis says that the Philistines, Sidon (a prominent Phoenician city), and Heth were all descendants of Ham, not Japheth (10:14–20).[81] Finding a way in which Noah's words about Japheth correspond to collective memories has proven elusive.[82] However, if Noah's words are drunken ramblings rather than etiological prophecies, then interpreters should not expect to find an obvious fulfillment of such words. Like Noah's other words, they express intoxicated confusion.

[76] See Carol Ochs's "Contemporary Reflection" on Gen 6:9–11:32, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism and URJ Press, 2008) 55–56, at 55; Reed, "Injustice," 265–66.

[77] Noah's ability to construct a pun and poetry does not necessarily indicate his sobriety. The medieval Chinese poet Li Bai, for example, is remembered for excellent poetry that revels in drunkenness.

[78] Sarna, *Genesis*, 67.

[79] Cf. Williams, *History*, 1:10, 445.

[80] For reviews of scholarship, see Rice, "Curse," 14–15 and esp. Reed, "Injustice," 142–45.

[81] Naturally, if one takes a diachronic approach and assigns different authors to 9:25–27 and 10:14–20, then this inconsistency is less important (assuming the redactor who merged the texts together was content with allowing discrepancies to stand). Thus, von Rad acknowledges the tensions between these texts but assigns the former to J and the latter to P (*Genesis*, 138; cf. Day, *Creation*, 144–47, esp. 145). Nevertheless, a problem with approaches like von Rad's remains: as Westermann writes, "it is difficult to imagine that the Philistines received a blessing together with Israel which promised them that they would expand into the tents of Shem (Israel)" (*Genesis 1–11*, 493).

[82] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 89; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 83; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963) 187; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 203; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 493.

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This understanding of 9:20–27 reinforces how Genesis 1–11 depicts humanity. Previously, readers encountered the first couple disobeying God's strongly worded command (2:4–3:24), Cain killing his own brother (4:1–16), Lamech threatening his wives by boasting about killing a child (4:19–23), and evil multiplying throughout the land and infecting humanity to its core (6:5). Noah, however, appeared different. He alone was innocent in his generation (6:9). He walked with God (6:9). Out of all humans, he and his family were deemed worthy to escape divine judgment (6:18).[83] He obeys what God commands (6:22; 7:5). But alcohol, the text teaches, can rob even the most righteous person of their innocence. Before Noah dies, he has his own fall from goodness.[84] Mari Jørstad has already pointed to multiple points of connection between Adam, Cain, and Noah, particularly in relation to the ground.[85] Noah also recapitulates Adam, Eve, and Cain when he fails to embody goodness. His drunken fit reinforces a point made by Luis Alonso Schökel: "The flood has not washed away the original stain" of human wickedness.[86] Wishing harm upon his own grandchild, Noah reveals that he, too, has evil in the depths of his being (8:21). Previously, Genesis 3 shows humanity overconsuming fruit in a way that wreaks havoc on relationships, leading to curses and nakedness that needs to be covered. Genesis 9:20–27 operates the same way.[87] Human wickedness, especially

[83] Some interpreters have even argued that because Noah is depicted as righteous, his curse must be seen as trustworthy. See Walter E. Brown, "Noah: Sot or Saint? Genesis 9:20–27," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke* (ed. James I. Packer and Sven Soderlund; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 36–60, as well as a refutation in Waltke, *Genesis*, 148. It is more likely that Genesis 1–11 depicts even the supposedly righteous Noah as fallible as well, particularly when under alcohol's influence.

[84] Scholars have challenged the traditional notion that Genesis 1–11 is solely about a "fall." For example, after pointing to Abel, Enoch, and Noah, Mark S. Smith writes, "in the end, 'original goodness' parallels the unfolding of original sin or primordial sin in the story of Genesis 1–11" (*The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible* [Louisville: WJK, 2019] 85). While Smith's conclusion deserves careful consideration, Abel and Enoch play very minor roles in Genesis, and Noah—as argued in this article—fails to embody goodness in the final episode before his death. So, even if traditional interpretations of Genesis do not get everything correct, one can still make a strong case for Genesis 1–11 displaying a fairly negative view of humanity.

[85] Mari Jørstad, "The Ground that Opened Its Mouth: The Ground's Response to Human Violence in Genesis 4," *JBL* 135 (2016) 705–15, at 706.

[86] Alonso Schökel, *Hermano*, 51, see also 45, translation mine with help from Manuel Ramos. See also Ross, "Curse," 225–26; John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 129–30; Steinmann, *Genesis*, 114; Esteban Voth and Milton Acosta Benítez, "Génesis," in *Comentario bíblico contemporáneo. Estudio de toda la Biblia desde América Latina* (ed. C. René Padilla; San Sebastián, Costa Rica: Comité Latinoamericano de Literatura Bíblica, 2019) 29–91, at 51; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 483, 485.

[87] Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 86–87; idem, *Creation*, 154; J. Kruger, "Creation-Uncreation, 129*–40*; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 414–15; Devora Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History," *JBL* 113 (1994) 193–207; Anthony J. Tomasino, "History Repeats Itself: The 'Fall' and Noah's Drunkenness," *VT* 42 (1992) 128–30; Vogels, "Cham," 571–73. For the most comprehensive treatment of how Gen 9:18–27

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when unleashed by alcohol, can taint even time-honored traditions like the blessing of one's children before death.

Conclusion

As many African American interpreters realized, Gen 9:20–27 makes the most sense when readers connect Noah's drunkenness in 9:20–24 with his words in 9:25–27. His curses and blessings are the words of someone unable to think clearly because of alcohol's influence. Noah damns his own grandchild to the lowest kind of enslavement, a punishment disproportionate to the offence even if it were aimed at the actual wrongdoer. Noah's focus on enslavement does not match the primary emphasis in biblical books, which is not on enslaving Canaanites. Noah's doxology seems out of place with his other words, as if he has trouble staying on topic. His talk of Japheth is difficult to correlate with historical events. On the whole, Noah's curse does not appear to be an etiology or prophecy, but rather the confused words of someone who has had too much to drink. The best way to read this text—both in terms of exegesis and its impact on society—is to see Noah as a drunken fool acting like a drunken fool.

relates to Genesis 1–11, see Reed, "Injustice," 188–267, esp. 234–38. For an excellent account of how alcohol impacts individuals elsewhere in Genesis, see Walsh, "Influence," esp. 20–23, 26–29.

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