

The Curse of the Canaanites

After the flood, ...*Noah began farming and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father... When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him* (Genesis 9:18-24).

This passage, with all of its interpretive problems, is all about one major point – the curse of the Canaanites, the immigrants to the land that God gave to Abraham 500 years after the flood.

After telling us that the whole earth was repopulated by the offspring of Noah's three sons, Moses gives us a brief five-sentence account of what happened to cause the curse on the Canaanites. Since Noah came from the pre-flood world where everybody was a vegetarian, he did what he knew how to do and began farming. In this account, enough time has passed since the departure from the ark for Noah to plant a garden, harvest the grapes, and make wine, then drink to the place where he became drunk. While laying in his tent, Noah uncovered himself.

This is the first use of the word *wine* in the Bible, but probably not the first drunkenness from alcohol. Noah was certainly aware of the effects of drinking alcohol. Jesus told the apostles, *for as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark* (Matthew 24:38).

As Noah lay half asleep, and more than half drunk, *Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father....* This one sentence is all we know about the sin of Noah's youngest son Ham, which resulted in the curse of Ham's son Canaan. But we know very little about what he did. So many varied and strange theories have been proposed.

- Some rabbis said Ham castrated Noah, thus explaining why Noah had no other sons. **But** this goes way beyond anything even remotely mentioned in the passage.
- Some say Ham was homosexually involved with his father because the verb *saw* can mean, "gazed with satisfaction." **But** the text only said he saw his father's nakedness, not that he approached him in any way. Again, way beyond the passage.
- Some claimed that Ham had sexual relations with his mother, which under the Mosaic Law was called uncovering his father's nakedness. **But** it was Noah himself, not Ham, who uncovered his nakedness.
- Another possibility is that Ham laughed at his father and made fun of him to his brothers. This is possible, **but** nothing is mentioned about laughter or mocking.
- The most likely answer is that it was considered a serious breach of the family morality for anyone to see the nakedness of the patriarch. What we know Ham did was to look at his father's nakedness.

In Leviticus 18:3, God told the Israelites, *you shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you.* Then nine times in verses 7-19 we read, *you shall not uncover the nakedness of... various people.* The description is at least a reminder of the sin of Ham. *So he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant"* (Genesis 9:25-29). When Noah awoke from his drunkenness, he knew what had happened. And the one he cursed was not his son Ham, but Ham's son Canaan. This restricted the curse because Ham's other children were not cursed. The reason for the curse on Canaan is unknown.