

What Happened in Noah's Tent?

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Noah, being human, began to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, and became drunk, and uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and he told his two brothers outside. Shem and Japheth took the garment and placed it on both their shoulders. They walked backwards and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away; the nakedness of their father they did not see. Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done to him. He said, "Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

– Gen. 9:20-25

The episode of Noah's drunkenness in Gen. 9:20-25 is notoriously elliptical; its obscurities generated a flood of exegetical activity, ancient and modern. Questions raised are more forthcoming than answers. What occurred in Noah's tent? Was Ham or Canaan the transgressor? Why was Canaan – and not Ham – cursed?

From earliest times, interpreters noticed that although the text claims "*Ham...saw the nakedness*," a more active crime is implied by the words, "*Noah...knew what his youngest son had done to him*," and by the severity of the punishment. Five major theories have been advanced:

1. Ham merely looked at Noah's nakedness;
2. Ham looked at Noah's nakedness and then gossiped about it;
3. Ham (and/or Canaan) castrated Noah;
4. Ham sexually violated Noah;
5. Ham sexually violated Noah's wife.

Ham Just Saw

The theory that Ham merely looked upon his drunken, naked father has the advantage of simplicity. Gen. 9:22 states "*Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and he*

told his two brothers outside.” Westermann, for one, has no patience for those who read a more sordid incident into the tale. He states, “This [episode of Noah’s drunkenness] is narrated so clearly that it is difficult to understand how exegetes have missed the obvious meaning.”¹

Strangely, many interpreters who adhere to the Ham Just Saw explanation of events also insist that Noah curses Canaan, and not Ham, in order “to stigmatize distasteful practices on the part of the older inhabitants of the land.”² Avisure, who also maintains that Ham only looked at Noah’s genitals, writes:

Licentiousness and sexual perversity were commonplace among the Canaanites, whom the Israelites encountered through the conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan, and the tendency of the story and the subsequent curse is to show that the Israelites attributed the origins of these illicit acts to the progenitor of the Canaanites.³

The famed sexual decadence of the Canaanites notwithstanding, this explanation of the context of the curse is fundamentally at odds with the interpretation that Ham “just saw.” If the crime is seeing, the moral of the tale cannot be an exhortation to sexual discipline. A connection between the transgression and the curse is only apparent if the crime is sexual in nature.

Ham Saw...and Told

This permutation of the Ham Just Saw theory has much to recommend it. Most importantly, the problem of the active transgression implied by “*did*” in the phrase “*Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done to him*” has a better solution. Ham’s transgression is not merely seeing his father naked, but “bruited about what he had seen.”⁴

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. J.J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 488.

² E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 62.

³ Yitzhak Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background* (Tel Aviv – Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 1999), 50.

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 66.

Calling attention to the ominous implication of “telling,” Tomasino explores the many parallelisms between the “Fall” story of Adam and Eve and Noah’s drunkenness. He asserts that the latter “seems to serve ‘double duty’ in the Primeval History, providing parallels to both the Fall and the story of Cain and Abel.”⁵

Ham’s role is analogous to that of the serpent in Eden. When he saw his father’s nakedness, Ham went and told (*wayyaggēd*) his brothers about it (ix 22). When Adam and Eve told YHWH God that they had hidden because they were naked, God asked, “Who told (*higgîd*) you that you were naked?” (iii 11)...Furthermore, when Ham told his brothers about their father’s nudity, he was undoubtedly tempting them with forbidden knowledge (the opportunity to see their father’s nakedness). Finally, for his part in the Fall, the serpent was cursed (‘*ārûr*’) more than any other creatures (iii 14). His offspring were doomed to be subject to the woman’s offspring (iii 15). Ham’s offspring, too, became cursed (‘*ārûr*’), doomed to subjugation to the offspring of his brothers.”⁶

If we find Tomasino’s examination of the parallels convincing, the solution to the “cursed be Canaan” problem is provided. If not, it remains a neuralgic signal the bible might be obliquely telling a more sordid story.

Ham Castrated

The theory Ham castrated Noah is deceptively ubiquitous; almost every discussion of Gen. 9:20-25 discusses this possibility. The extent of scholarly attention paid is probably the result of a Talmudic discussion of the possibility of Noah’s castration (BT *Sanhedrin* 70a), lending a certain measure of antiquity and authority to the argument.

A second argument supporting the possibility of castration stems from the fact that, even though Noah was ordered twice upon disembarkation to “*be fruitful and multiply*,” unlike all the other characters in Genesis 5 and Gen. 10:10-25, the phrase “*he had other sons and daughters*,”

⁵ Anthony J. Tomasino, “History Repeats Itself: The “fall” and Noah’s Drunkenness,” VT 42, no.1 (1992),129.

⁶ Ibid., 130.

is never said of Noah.”⁷ Castration, however, is far from the only possible reason for Noah’s post-diluvian infertility.

One final line of reasoning holds that, like the polytheistic origins of much of the Flood narrative, Gen. 9:20-25 goes back to an Ancient Near Eastern sources. “From the writings of Philo Byblius we learn that there was current among the Canaanites a legend regarding one of their gods – El Kronos...– who approached his father (Uranus) and with a knife in his hand perpetrated an act that prevented him from begetting any more children.”⁸ This castration motif is widespread; Huro-Hittite mythology preserves a tale of the gods in which Anu has his Genitals bitten off by his son Kumarbi, and in Greek mythology Chronos is castrated by Zeus, who steals his throne.⁹

The parallel between the biblical text and the myths under examination is not particularly strong. Noah is neither a God nor a king, and Ham’s act in no way adds to Ham’s power or inheritance. As Baumgarten notes, “unlike all other myths of castration the son doesn’t want to displace his father.”¹⁰

Ham Sexually Violated Noah

The Paternal Incest Theory is by far the most prominent in modern scholarship and popular homiletics. Regretfully, all too many scholars, preachers and Rabbis conceptualize

⁷ A. I. Baumgarten, “Myth and Midrash: Gen. 9:20-29,” in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, ed. Jacob Neusner, 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 63 n. 52.

⁸ Cassuto, Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* Vol. 2 trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 150.

⁹ Ibid., 148-172.

¹⁰ Baumgarten, “Myth,” 68 and 64 “...I think it unlikely that they would have utilized a motif with such clear divine associations in a story told to stress the humanity of the flood hero.”

Ham's abuse of his father as a homosexual act rather than an act of aggression. If this is a rape scene, the text depicts sexual violence, not sexual intercourse.¹¹

Again, this theory benefits from a Talmudic pedigree.¹² The arguments of its main proponents may be divided into two categories: lexical and structural. It is argued that a "literal reading" of the text, if executed properly, depicts a sexual scenario. The cultural and religious significance of the words employed by the author should not be overlooked. Gen. 9:2b reads: "he [Noah] *uncovered himself in his tent*."

Bergsma and Hahn explain that the verb *uncovered* "is used...to designate illicit (usually incestuous) sexual intercourse, and also in two verses of Deuteronomy condemning parent-child incest (Deut 23:2 and 27:20)."¹³ The latter of these terms will be introduced in the next verse, "*Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father*." "To see the nakedness," is elsewhere a reference to sexual intercourse, cf. Lev. 20:17; 18:6.¹⁴ These lexical cues have led many scholars to assert, like Steinmetz:

It seems clear to me that the text suggests a sexual violation by Ham of his father; the text does not make clear the nature of the violation, and probably we need not surmise further details. But clearly the 'seeing of nakedness' implies a sexual violation, as it does throughout the biblical text in both legal and narrative passages.¹⁵

¹¹ For example: H.A.J. Kruger, "Creation-Uncreation: Reflection of Reversal Motifs in Genesis 9:18-24 (25-29)," in *The Bible and Its World: Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, July 29-August 5, 1997* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1999) 136-7: "According to Gen. 1:26-27, God created humankind as *male* and *female*, that is, two sexual opposite beings...Genesis 9:20-24 explores God creating the heterosexual human race by emphasizing the inversion of Ham's deviating attitude. Homosexual orientation does not fit in with God's normal creation, thus homosexuality is presented as another form of uncreation (see Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10)."

¹² *b. Sanh.* 70a.

¹³ John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)," *JBL* 124, no. 1 (2005), 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29. Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 73 says: "...the expressions to see one's nakedness and to uncover one's nakedness belong to the same semantic field. They are synonymous euphemisms for sexual intercourse."

¹⁵ So also Devora Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of the Primeval History," *JBL* 113 no. 2 (1994): 193-207, 198.

The best structural argument on behalf of the Paternal Incest theory is offered by Zakovitch and Shinan. They demonstrate chiastic relationships between the beginning and end of the Flood story, the beginning and end of the Sodom story, and finally the tales of Noah's Drunkenness and Lot's Drunkenness.¹⁶

They explain that the story of the Flood both begins and ends with sexual sins which defy the natural order. In Gen. 6:1-4 angels mate with human women, giving rise to the wickedness which will be the cause of the flood's destruction. In Gen. 9:20-25 the almost Edenic state of the new creation is despoiled by Ham's sexual abuse of his father. This is mirrored by the Sodom narrative in what they call "perfect point-by-point symmetry."¹⁷ The Sodom narrative also begins and ends with sexual sins; in Gen. 19:1-26 the male human inhabitants of Sodom attempt to have sexual intercourse with three angels lodging in Lot's home. After the destruction of Sodom, in Gen. 19:30-38 Lot's daughters make him drunk and seduce him into conceiving children. Finally, in each case, a new generation carries the blame. In the first, a flood of water, followed by incest, results in the curse of Ham's offspring. In the second, a flood of fire, followed by incest, results in the production of accursed offspring, the nations of Ammon and Moab.¹⁸

Ham Sexually Violated Noah's Wife

In a thorough presentation of the case for the Maternal Incest theory, Bergsma and Hahn write:

The currently popular paternal-incest interpretation has much to commend it, but in almost every case the evidence marshaled for this view actually better suits the maternal-incest theory. The heuristic strengths of the maternal-incest interpretation are manifold: it explains (1) the gravity of Ham's sin, (2) the rationale for the cursing of Canaan rather

¹⁶ Yair Zakovitch and Avigdor Shinan, *That's Not What the Good Book Says* (Tel Aviv: Yediot aharonot; Sifre hemed, 2004).

¹⁷ Zakovitch and Shinan, *Good Book*, 125.

¹⁸ Accursed in passages such as Deut 23:4.

than Ham, (3) Ham's motivation for committing the offense, (4) the repetition of "Ham, the father of Canaan," and (5) the sexually charged language of the passage. In addition, biblical and ancient Near Eastern analogues for Ham's crime are easy to find, and the related passages of the Pentateuch fit together more elegantly on this interpretation."¹⁹ In a world washed clean and in need of repopulation, Noah – as well as the rest of his

family – is twice commanded to "*be fruitful and multiply*."²⁰ Attempting to live up to the divine injunction, Noah drinks heavily and disrobes *in his wife's presence* as a prelude to sexual intercourse. Overcome by alcohol, Noah falls asleep instead. Ham takes advantage of this situation to uncover his father's nakedness ("*The nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother, you shall not uncover. She is your mother; do not uncover her nakedness*" Lev. 18:7). Canaan was the product of this union.

As in the Paternal Incest Theory, interpreters who believe the text describes Ham committing incest with his mother appeal to lexical and structural arguments. Agreeing that "*to see the nakedness*" is elsewhere a reference to sexual intercourse, they point out that in all the relevant texts "*see the nakedness*" refers to *heterosexual* intercourse, and "*the nakedness of your father*" refers to your *mother's* nakedness. In regard to the claim that the verb "*uncover*" is often used to describe illicit or incestuous sexual intercourse, they show that the two verses in the Pentateuch that condemn homosexual relations (Lev 18:22 and 20:13) use a different verb.

Bergsma and Hahn go on to illustrate that other "erotically charged lexemes in Gen. 9:20-27 suggest a situation of sexual transgression."²¹ They observe that wine and sexuality are connected in the bible and Ancient Near Eastern texts, and explore the image of "vineyard" as a

¹⁹ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness," 39-40.

²⁰ In Genesis 9:1-17, right before the vineyard episode, Noah and his sons are twice commanded to "be fruitful and multiply." Gen. 19:19 "from these the whole earth was peopled" suggest they fulfilled the command, and 9:18 and 22 stress Ham's role as Canaan's father.

²¹ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness," 30.

place of lovemaking.²² Again, they warn that the sexual encounters depicted by all this drunkenness, wine and vineyard imagery are heterosexual.

Structural arguments that a sexual situation is depicted in Gen. 6:20-25 are strengthened when we realize Noah's wife is the object of Ham's actions, and offspring is produced: Ham's son Canaan. Discussing the chiasmic relationship with Gen. 6:1-4 Kikawada and Quinn write:

Let us start with the working assumption that the epilogue, no less than the prologue, has to do with procreation. This is not so strange an assumption. After all, Noah has just been told to be fruitful and multiply...The parallel episode with the sons of God may be of some help here. In this episode there was illicit sexual activity, activity which violated the natural order. The flood was God's curse on the issue from this union, the mighty and renowned men of old...if these parallels are correct (and in general the chiasmic nature of the Flood story leads us to believe that they probably are), then Canaan would be cursed as the product of illicit sexual intercourse by Ham. Certainly the line of Ham produced men of renown – among them Nimrod, 'the first on earth to be a mighty man'...²³

Their focus on the production of offspring is certainly not misplaced. Even interpreters paying attention to the symmetry between the Flood and Sodom narratives are often led astray. It is easy to forget the sin of the men of Sodom is not depicted in the biblical text as attempted rape of other men but rather – in parallel to Gen. 6:1-4 – as *interspecies* intercourse. Just as angels mate with human women, human men attempt to have intercourse with angels. This error makes all the difference for understanding the point of the tale of Noah's Drunkenness and its place in the structure of Genesis.²⁴

The Maternal Incest theory alone adequately explains the threefold emphasis on Ham's paternity of Canaan and the reason that Canaan, and not Ham, is the recipient of Noah's curse:

²² Ibid.

²³ Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 102.

²⁴ Many interpreters do not understand this difference. For instance, convinced that the Sodom story is about homosexuality, Letellier writes, "Lot has been living in a society of homosexuals...Lot's wife, by virtue of her position as wife and mother is anomalous both in the homosexual society of Sodom..." Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 191.

“...it illuminates, without altering the well-established genealogy of Noah’s sons, the seemingly unjust Biblical story in which Noah curses Canaan for something Ham did. Idiomatically understood, Canaan bears Noah’s curse of slavery, because he is the fruit of Ham’s incest.”

Importantly, another set of biblical texts relating a son’s sexual intercourse with his father’s wife also use this trespass as an explanation for the degradation of the son and his descendants: “Reuben’s incestuous affair with Bilhah, his father’s concubine, is explicitly cited as the reason why he and his descendants lose their natural right of pre-eminence in Israel as the first born.”²⁵

²⁵ Bassett, “Noah’s Nakedness,” 235. Genesis 35:22 and 49:3-4.

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