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# Exonerating Ham: An Alternative Reading of Genesis 9:20-27

T. Desmond Alexander
Senior Research Fellow in Biblical Studies
Union Theological College, Belfast
t.d.alexander@union.ac.uk

Abstract

For over two millennia, a strong consensus has judged Ham as the guilty party associated with Noah's nakedness in Gen 9:20-27. While no consensus has been reached regarding Ham's crime, his actions of seeing and telling in verse 22 have been interpreted as signalling inappropriate behaviour. However, the broader context does not comfortably support blaming Ham. Noah identifies the culprit as his 'youngest son' (9:24) and curses Canaan (9:25-27). Scholarly attempts to reconcile these inconsistencies in the episode raise as many problems as they solve. An alternative reading of the passage is possible, exonerating Ham and identifying his youngest son, Canaan, as the culprit. This approach offers a more straightforward solution to the questions that attributing blame to Ham raises.

## 1. Introduction

The book of Genesis has more than its fair share of unusual episodes. The brief account of Noah's drunkenness in 9:20-27 presents some interesting challenges for exegetes and commentators.[1] The story is well known, centring on the actions of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, when they discover their father lying naked in his tent. Subsequently, Noah curses Canaan, Ham's son, and states that he will serve Shem and Japheth. As they have wrestled with this episode, commentators have grappled with three significant questions:

1. What was the nature of Ham's sin in verse 22?
2. Who is Noah's 'youngest son', mentioned in verse 24?
3. Why is Canaan, rather than Ham, cursed by Noah in verse 25?

1. As E. A. Speiser observes, 'The passage … supplies more questions than answers' (*Genesis*, AB 1 (Doubleday, 1964), 62).

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The first question arises due to the limited information recorded in 9:22. The biblical text states that Ham saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside the tent. The brevity of detail has resulted in various proposals regarding Ham's misdeed, and, as we shall observe in more detail, these range from dishonouring his father by speaking inappropriately of him to having intercourse with his mother or even castrating his father.

The second question derives from the fact that Noah describes the culprit as 'his youngest son', but in the various lists of Noah's sons recorded in Genesis, Ham is always placed after Shem and before Japheth (5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18,22; 10:1; cf. 1 Chr 1:4). The consistency with which Ham is named as the second son jars with the idea that he is Noah's youngest son mentioned in 9:24. This requires an explanation. As we shall see, various theories have been formulated to explain how Ham should be viewed as Noah's youngest son. On the one hand, some scholars have sought to explain how 'youngest' could apply to Ham, maintaining that the listing 'Shem, Ham, and Japheth' does not represent their birth order. On the other hand, adopting a different approach, some scholars have argued that the present text is an amalgam of two traditions in which the names of Noah's sons were listed as Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and Shem, Japheth, and Canaan, respectively. Consequently, the youngest son of verse 24 refers to Canaan, not Ham. This latter approach requires Canaan's name to replace Ham's in verse 22.

The third issue that has troubled commentators concerns Noah's cursing of Canaan, listed in 10:6 as Ham's fourth and youngest son. Why would Noah curse Canaan if his father, Ham, misbehaved? Sons are not usually punished for their father's misdeeds. Furthermore, why should only Canaan be cursed when Ham had other sons? Why does Noah single out Canaan alone for punishment? As we shall see, different explanations have been devised to explain this phenomenon, some of which have influenced the discussion regarding the nature of Ham's sin.

Before we consider scholarly responses to these three questions in more detail, it may be helpful to state briefly, at this point, the aim of this essay. Despite the almost universal assumption that Ham is responsible for mistreating his father, it will be argued that he has been wrongly convicted of a felony based on weak and questionable evidence. Ham's actions can be viewed as entirely innocent. Moreover, in exonerating Ham, it will be proposed that the one who mistreats Noah is Canaan. This accounts best for Noah's reference to his 'youngest son' and the cursing of Canaan. However, before attempting to establish Ham's innocence and Canaan's guilt, it may be helpful to survey the

reception history of this passage with reference to the three questions noted above.[2]

## 2. What was the nature of Ham's sin in 9:22?

Assessments of Ham's sin may be classified under five general categories, while noting that some scholars contend that Ham's sin involves several inappropriate actions and should not be restricted to one category.

### 2.1 Castration

A variety of ancient Jewish texts testify to the idea that Ham was responsible for castrating his father. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Sanh. 70a.18, '**Rav and Shmuel** disagreed: **One says** that Ham **castrated** Noah **and one says** that Ham **sodomized him.**'[3] The text then states that because Ham castrated his father, preventing him from having a fourth son, Noah pronounced a curse on Ham's fourth son, Canaan:

> The Gemara explains: **The one who says that Ham castrated** Noah adduces the following proof: **Since he injured** Noah **with** respect to the possibility of conceiving **a fourth** son, which Noah wanted but could no longer have, therefore Noah **cursed him by means of** Ham's **fourth son.** (b. Sanh. 70a.19)[4]

Recognising that castration provides an explanation for the cursing of Canaan, b. Sanh. 70a then addresses the question of how the cursing of Canaan can be

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2. For broader surveys of how this passage has had significant social implications, see Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*, ATLA Monograph 12 (Scarecrow Press, 1978); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1093/0195142799.001.0001; David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003); Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery*, St Andrew's Studies in Reformation History (Ashgate, 2009); David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 10 (De Gruyter, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110522471.

3. In quotations of b. Sanh., text in bold indicates the specific wording of the original, which here reads: רַב וּשְׁמוּאֵל חַד אָמַר סֵרְסוֹ וְחַד אָמַר רְבָעוֹ. Texts and translations of b. Sanhedrin are from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud, available at www.sefaria.org.

4. The original reads: מַאן דְּאָמַר סֵרְסוֹ מִתּוֹךְ שֶׁקִּלְקְלוֹ בְּרִבִּיעִי קִלְּלוֹ בְּרִבִּיעִי

explained by the alternative view that Ham sodomised Noah. In response, it observes that Shmuel believed that Noah was both castrated and sodomised by Ham:

> The Gemara asks: **Granted, according to the one who says** that Ham **castrated** Noah, it is **due to that** reason that Noah cursed Ham **by means** of Ham's **fourth** son. **But according to the one who says** that Ham **sodomized him, what is different** about his **fourth** son? **He should have cursed** Ham **directly**. The Gemara answers: This Sage holds that both **this** offense **and that** offense **were** committed. All agree that Ham castrated Noah, and some say that Ham also sodomized him. (b. Sanh. 70a.20.)[5]

The testimony of b. Sanh. 70a is reflected in the Aramaic translation of Genesis 9:24 in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan:

> And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew, by the relation of a dream, what had been done to him by Cham his son, who was inferior in worth, on the account that he had not begotten a fourth son. (Tg. Ps.-J. on Gen 9:24 (Etheridge[6]))

While the text avoids using the terminology of castration, this is implied by the explanation that Noah did not have a fourth son. A similar outlook comes in Gen. Rab. 36.7:

> A. Said R. Berekhiah, 'Noah in the ark was most distressed that he had no young son to take care of him. He said, "When I shall get out of this ark, I shall produce a young son to take care of me."
>
> B. 'When Ham had done the disgraceful deed, he said, "You are the one who stopped me from producing a young son to to [sic.] take care of me, therefore that man himself [you] will be a servant to his brothers."' (Gen. Rab. 36.7.)[7]

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5. The original reads:
בְּשִׁלְמָא לְמַאן דְּאָמַר סֵרְסוֹ מִשּׁוּם הָכִי קִלְלוֹ בְּרִבִיעִי אֶלָּא לְמַאן דְּאָמַר רְבָעוֹ מַאי שְׁנָא רְבִיעִי נִלְטֵיהּ בְּהֲדָיְא הָא וְהָא הֲוַאי

6. J. W. Etheridge, *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* (London, 1862).

7. Translations of Genesis Rabbah are from Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation: Vol. 2: Parashiyyot Thirty-Four through Sixty-Seven on Genesis 8:15 to 28:9*, BJS 105 (Scholars Press, 1985). The original reads:
רַבִּי בֶּרֶכְיָה הַרְבֵּה צַעַר נִצְטַעֵר נֹחַ בַּתֵּבָה שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה לוֹ בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְשַׁמְּשֶׁנּוּ אָמַר לְכְשֶׁאֵצֵא אֲנִי מַעֲמִיד לִי בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְשַׁמְּשֵׁנִי כֵּיוָן שֶׁעָשָׂה לוֹ חָם אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה אָמַר אַתָּה מָנַעְתָּ אוֹתִי מִלְהַעֲמִיד לִי בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְשַׁמְּשֵׁנִי לְפִיכָךְ יִהְיֶה אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ עֶבֶד לְאֶחָיו שֶׁהֵן עֲבָדִים לִי

Referencing what is recorded in b. Sanh. 70a, Rashi briefly comments, 'Some say that he castrated him and some say that he sodomized him.'[8] According to Albert Baumgarten, Jewish rabbis developed this tradition to explain features of the text of Genesis 9:20-27.[9] There is no evidence to suggest that they were preserving an ancient tradition.

While the tradition of Ham's castration of Noah appears to have been popular in rabbinic Judaism, it lacks support today. Extrapolating from the limited information in the ancient texts, the theory seems to have been created to explain why Noah cursed Canaan and not Ham. However, the text of 9:20-27 lacks any hint that Ham's actions involved castrating his father. John Bergsma and Scott Hahn conclude that no 'lexical hint' in 9:20-27 suggests castration.[10]

## 2.2 Paternal incest

The rabbinic tradition of castration is often mentioned alongside the idea that Ham committed a homosexual act with his father. According to b. Sanh. 70a.18, '**Rav and Shmuel** disagreed: **One says** that Ham **castrated** Noah **and one says** that Ham **sodomized him**.'[11] The text of b. Sanh. 70a.19 goes on to say:

> The Gemara explains: **... And the one who says** that Ham **sodomized** Noah **learned** this from a verbal analogy between the words **'and he saw'** and **'and he saw.' Here it is written: 'And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father'; and there it is written: 'And Shechem, son of Hamor** the Hivite, prince of the country, **saw her**, and he took her, and lay with her, and afflicted her' (Genesis 34:2).[12]

Reflecting this ancient rabbinic tradition, some modern scholars have also highlighted the sexual nature of Ham's sin. In a brief discussion of Genesis 9:18-29, Anthony Phillips attributes to Ham an 'abhorrent sexual practice

8. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi's Commentary: Genesis* (Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1929). The original reads: יֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים סֵרְסוֹ וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים רְבָעוֹ

9. See Albert I. Baumgarten, 'Myth and Midrash: Genesis 9:20-29', in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. Jacob Neusner, SJLA 12 (Brill, 1975), 55–71.

10. John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)', *JBL* 124 (2005): 28, https://doi.org/10.2307/30040989.

11. The original reads: רַב וּשְׁמוּאֵל חַד אָמַר סֵרְסוֹ וְחַד אָמַר רְבָעוֹ

12. The original reads:
וּמַאן דְּאָמַר רְבָעוֹ גְּמַר וַיַּרְא וַיַּרְא כְּתִיב הָכָא וַיַּרְא חָם אֲבִי כְנַעַן אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וּכְתִיב הָתָם וַיַּרְא אוֹתָהּ שְׁכֶם בֶּן חֲמוֹר וְגוֹ

involving a father'.[13] Commenting on Ham's witnessing of his father's nakedness, Phillips writes,

> It is difficult to tell from the text of Gen. ix whether Ham simply looked upon his father's private parts or whether he engaged in sexual relations with him. Since, however, Gen. ix 24 specifically refers to Noah knowing what his son had done to him, we should perhaps understand this incident as more than an immodest looking at his drunken and naked father but rather as his actual seduction while unconscious – an act so abhorrent that the author is unwilling to spell it out.[14]

A similar approach is adopted by Devora Steinmetz, who writes,

> 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]

To reinforce this argument, she comments that 'seeing often is a prelude to sexual misappropriation in biblical narratives'.[16]

According to Palmer Robertson, drawing on Leviticus 20:17-19, the idiom 'looking on a person's nakedness' may be a circumlocution for sexual sin.[17] With this in view, Robertson proposes that, after discovering his father in a drunken state, Ham 'initiated a homosexual relationship with him'.[18] In support of this interpretation, Robertson contrasts the actions of Shem and Japheth, who act with extreme modesty.

Martti Nissinen suggests that 'seeing someone's nakedness' implies sexual activity; it is 'an expurgated expression for something that the narrator wishes not to put into words.'[19] He writes,

> Both seeing nudity (*rāʿâ ʿerwâ*) and revealing it (*gālâ ʿerwâ*) are, without a doubt, circumlocutions for sexual intercourse, as many translations (the

13. Anthony Phillips, 'Uncovering the Father's Skirt', *VT* 30 (1980): 41, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853380X00506.

14. Phillips, 'Uncovering the Father's Skirt', 41.

15. Devora Steinmetz, 'Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History', *JBL* 113 (1994): 198, https://doi.org/10.2307/3266510.

16. Steinmetz, 'Vineyard, Farm, and Garden', 199.

17. O. Palmer Robertson, 'Current Critical Questions Concerning the "Curse of Ham" (Gen 9:20-27)', *JETS* 41 (1998): 179.

18. Robertson, 'Current Critical Questions', 179.

19. Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1998), 52.

> NEB, among others) actually put it. Thus, interpreting the euphemism, one can assume that Ham did something more than just get a glimpse of his naked father.[20]

Building on this, Nissinen suggests that Ham's action was motivated by a desire to exercise dominion over his father and establish 'his superiority by disgracing his father sexually'.[21]

Accepting the view of Rabbi Samuel, Donald Wold describes Ham's act as 'incestuous homosexual rape'.[22] As others contend, Wold takes the expressions 'to uncover nakedness' and 'to see one's nakedness' as having sexual connotations. In his opinion, these expressions are 'synonymous euphemisms for sexual intercourse',[23] belonging to the same semantic field. According to Wold, Noah cursed Ham's son because Ham dishonoured his father. Wold concludes that this episode illustrates in the person of Ham 'the archetypes of sexual abominations: incest, homosexuality, and rape'.[24]

Drawing on the studies of Nissinen and Wold, Robert Gagnon suggests that Ham's treatment of Noah is 'an instance of incestuous, homosexual rape'.[25] Among the arguments that he offers, he contends that 'the language of "uncovering" and "seeing the nakedness of" connects up with similar phrases denoting sexual intercourse'.[26] Regarding Ham's motivation, Gagnon speculates, 'Ham hoped to usurp the authority of his father and elder brothers, establishing his right to succeed his father as patriarch.'[27] For Gagnon, Ham's actions are heinous, involving rape, incest, and dishonouring his father.

Adopting a somewhat similar position, John Goldingay notes that in various passages '"exposing the naked body" of someone or "seeing" it is a kind of metonymy or synecdoche and euphemism for having sex with them'.[28] Consequently, Goldingay suggests that 'Ham sexually assaulted his father – or his mother.'[29]

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20. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 52.
21. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 53.
22. Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Baker, 1998), 68.
23. Wold, *Out of Order*, 73.
24. Wold, *Out of Order*, 75.
25. Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon, 2001), 64.
26. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 66.
27. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 66–67.
28. John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch (Baker Academic, 2020), 168.
29. Goldingay, *Genesis*, 168–169.

While some scholars favour the idea that Ham's actions fall into the category of paternal incest, many scholars are hesitant about adopting this approach. Many have reservations about interpreting the expression 'seeing another's nakedness' as always denoting sexual activity. As Gene Rice remarks,

> The proper idiomatic expression for intercourse is to uncover the nakedness of another. Except for one instance, 'uncover' is consistently the verb of the idiom for intercourse in Lev. 18 and 20. In Lev. 20:17 'uncover' and 'see' are used in parallelism to each other, but this usage of 'see' is clearly exceptional for the parallelism with 'uncover' has to be made explicit.[30]

Had Ham been responsible for uncovering Noah's nakedness, the case for sexual activity would be stronger. However, the text of 9:21 makes it clear that Noah uncovered his own nakedness when drunk. No blame is attached to Ham for this. Moreover, as various scholars recognise, the actions of Shem and Japheth in covering Noah's nakedness suggest that the reference to seeing Noah's nakedness should be understood literally, rather than idiomatically.

### 2.3 Maternal incest

In an interesting twist on the concept of paternal incest, a few scholars have proposed that Ham's sin takes the form of maternal incest. This suggestion is considered to offer a better explanation for the cursing of Canaan.

Frederick Bassett favours what he describes as an idiomatic interpretation of Noah's nakedness, arguing that in the laws of Leviticus 18 and 20, the idiom 'to see the nakedness of someone' means to have sexual intercourse. Accordingly, he writes,

> It is possible that the statement that Ham saw the nakedness of his father originally meant that he had sexual intercourse with his father's wife. If so, this would explain the seriousness of the offense which led to the curse. It would also explain why Noah cursed only one of Ham's several sons, if it is further assumed that Canaan was the fruit of such a case of incest.[31]

Bassett, however, recognises that the subsequent account of Shem and Japheth covering the nakedness of Noah implies that 'seeing nakedness' is to be taken literally. Since this undermines an idiomatic interpretation, Bassett speculates 'that the redactor, or perhaps a later editor, has missed the idiomatic meaning

30. Gene Rice, 'Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18-27)', *JRT* 29 (1972): 11–12.

31. Frederick W. Bassett, 'Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?', *VT* 21 (1971): 235, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853371X00074.

of the tradition that Noah's son saw his father's nakedness and has added the reference to the brothers' covering their father's nakedness with a garment'.[32]

Rejecting other options, Bergsma and Hahn propose that 'the theory of maternal incest best explains the otherwise anomalous features of both the text and its relationship to its context'.[33] To arrive at this conclusion, Bergsma and Hahn view favourably the arguments that have been marshalled for paternal incest. They rely heavily on the following evidence: the idiomatic meaning of the phrase 'to see the nakedness of the father' and the 'erotic undertones of the text'.[34] In addition, they draw on intertextual relationships that Genesis 9:20-27 has with Genesis 6:1-4 and 19:30-38, Leviticus 18 and 20, and Deuteronomy 23:1, noting that in some passages the Canaanites are associated with incest (e.g. Lev 18:7, cf. 18:3). In light of this evidence, they claim that to maintain that 'Ham merely looked at Noah is to turn a deaf ear to the literary nuances of the narrative.'[35] Furthermore, Bergsma and Hahn contend that Canaan is the fruit of this maternal incest, and this best explains 'why Canaan is cursed, and why Ham is repeatedly identified as "the father of Canaan"'.[36] They claim, 'Canaan is cursed because his origin was a vile, taboo act on the part of his father.'[37]

Adopting a somewhat unusual interpretation of this passage, Cynthia Chapman argues that Ham either 'saw his mother naked with his father in her tent or ... committed incest with his mother'.[38] Her approach involves ignoring the Masoretic pointing of אָהֳלֹה (*oholoh* – 'his tent') and reading the Hebrew consonants as 'her tent'. However, this interpretation does not sit comfortably with the subsequent actions of Shem and Japheth, who cover their father's nakedness with a cloak. Remarkably, the text makes no mention of Noah's wife being present with him in the tent, a strange omission if Ham's crime is maternal incest.

John Walton offers a further variation on the theme of maternal incest. In an attempt to explain 'why the text falls considerably short of being explicit'[39] regarding Ham's crime, Walton speculates that his offence is not that he did

32. Bassett, 'Noah's Nakedness', 233–234.

33. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 26 n. 4.

34. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 33. Elsewhere, they speak of 'the sexually charged language of the passage' (p. 40).

35. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 34.

36. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 35.

37. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 35.

38. Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, AYBRL (Yale University Press, 2016), 83, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300197945.001.0001.

39. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2001), 348.

something wrong but that he intimated to his brothers his desire to misbehave. Walton writes,

> Since the 'nakedness of the father' can include the nakedness of the mother and since the nakedness of the father is a euphemism for coitus (throughout Lev. 18 and 20), is it possible that both Noah and his wife have become drunk and, falling into unconsciousness after intercourse, lie exposed in the tent?[40]

Accepting this scenario, Walton suggests that in his conversation with his brothers, Ham 'may be hinting at … impregnating his mother'.[41] Walton's description of Ham's sin goes well beyond what is said in 9:22-23. Had this been the nature of Ham's sin, we might have expected that the author would have made it more explicit. The text offers no hard evidence to support such a speculative theory.

All these proposals involving maternal incest rest heavily on the assumption that the expression 'seeing another's nakedness' implies sexual activity. As already noted, this is a questionable assumption. Moreover, the brief description of Ham's actions in verse 24 lacks evidence that Noah's wife was present in the tent. If Ham's sexual activity involved his mother, it seems exceptionally strange that she is not referenced once in the entire passage.[42] Moreover, the narrator makes no mention of her becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son. The absence of such important details seriously undermines the argument for maternal incest having occurred. If, as Bergsma and Hahn argue, this passage is part of a general Pentateuchal critique of the Canaanites, it would be more natural, considering Genesis 19, to assume that it relates to homosexual activity rather than maternal incest.

The idea that maternal incest best explains the cursing of Canaan because he is the offspring of an illicit union is also somewhat implausible. Noah's cursing of Canaan is presented as occurring immediately after he awakens from his drunkenness. The sequence of verbs in verse 24 does not suggest that there was

40. Walton, *Genesis*, 348.

41. Walton, *Genesis*, 348.

42. David M. Carr, *Genesis 1–11* (Kohlhammer, 2021), 284, remarks 'Interpreting the misdeed of Noah's son as incest goes well beyond the text's own description of his misdeed, especially insofar as it imports into it a focus on his mother that does not appear anywhere in the story.' Carr dismisses the relevance of various texts in Leviticus 18 and 20 that mention illicit sexual intercourses, arguing that 'these texts in Leviticus do not actually pertain to the Genesis narrative about Noah revealing his own nakedness, nor do they support an interpretation of Gen 9:20-27 as concerning Ham "seeing" his father's nakedness by way of sex with Noah himself or Noah's wife' (p. 288).

a gap of some months between Noah's drunkenness and his cursing of newly born Canaan. While biblical Hebrew narrative can skip quickly over time, there is no indication that this occurs in verses 24-25. Everything in the text suggests that Canaan is alive before Ham sees his father's nakedness. If Canaan was the result of an illicit union, we might have expected some reference to his birth before his cursing by Noah.

Of all the suggestions regarding Ham's sin, the idea of maternal incest is a very modern reading of the text, heavily dependent on importing into this passage concepts that are present elsewhere in the Pentateuch. No exegetes before the twentieth century read the text in this way. Additionally, what might be presented as an explanation for the cursing of Canaan creates a more significant ethical problem: why is Canaan punished for the sin of his father? If maternal incest occurred, why did Noah not take any direct action against the culprit, Ham, at the time of the event?

## 2.4 Indiscretion and shaming

While some scholars speculate that Ham physically harmed Noah or his wife, others regard Ham's sin as falling under the general category of indiscretion and shaming.

The medieval Jewish scholar Nachmanides (Ramban) suggests that Ham did not act respectfully when he saw his father's nakedness. He writes:

> The sin committed was that Ham saw the nakedness of his father and did not act respectfully. He should have covered his nakedness and concealed his shame by not telling even his brothers, but he told the matter to his two brothers in the presence of many people in order to deride him [Noah]. This is the meaning of the word outside. And so did Onkelos translate it as 'in the market-place.' The meaning of the verse, And [Noah] knew what he had done unto him, is that he knew that Ham had disclosed his disgrace to many, and he was ashamed of the matter.[43]

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin adopts a similar stance. In describing the sin of Ham, Calvin speaks of him as 'ungodly and wicked' and 'a prodigy of

43. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah: Translated and Annotated with Index by Charles B. Chavel* (Shilo, 1971), 140–141. The original text reads:
וְהִנֵּה הַחֵטְא שֶׁרָאָה חָם עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וְלֹא נָהַג בּוֹ כָּבוֹד שֶׁהָיָה רָאוּי לוֹ לְכַסּוֹת עֶרְוָתוֹ וּלְכַסּוֹת קְלוֹנוֹ שֶׁלֹּא יַגִּידֶנּוּ גַּם לְאֶחָיו וְהוּא הִגִּיד הַדָּבָר לִשְׁנֵי אֶחָיו בִּפְנֵי רַבִּים לְהַלְעִיג עָלָיו וְזֶה טַעַם בַּחוּץ וְכֵן תִּרְגֵּם אוּנְקְלוֹס בְּשׁוּקָא וְטַעַם וַיֵּדַע אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לוֹ שֶׁגִּלָּה חֶרְפָּתוֹ לָרַבִּים וְהָיָה בּוֹשׁ בַּדָּבָר

scorn',[44] and concludes that Ham 'perversely insulted his father'.[45] He writes, 'Ham, by reproachfully laughing at his father, betrays his own depraved and malignant disposition.'[46] Calvin later comments, 'Ham alone eagerly seizes the occasion of ridiculing and inveighing against his father.'[47] However, Calvin's assessment is based on how he imagined the occasion, not on the text of Genesis. Genesis does not record what Ham said.

Commenting on Ham's sin, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch write, 'Not content with finding pleasure himself in his father's shame … he must proclaim his disgraceful pleasure to his brethren, and thus exhibit his shameless sensuality.'[48] In a later commentary on Genesis, Franz Delitzsch states that Ham 'not only looks in without instantly drawing back, but tries without delicacy and without the piety due to his father, to induce others to join in his scornful merriment'; he concludes that Ham manifests 'a carnal and animal feeling'.[49]

Without going into detail, E. A. Speiser states briefly that Ham's offence is 'disrespect toward his incapacitated and exposed father'.[50] Cassuto offers a fuller discussion of Ham's sin, which is especially interesting. On the one hand, he readily acknowledges that Genesis 'gives us no details of Ham's transgression'.[51] On the other hand, he assumes that Ham's actions were too abhorrent for the details to be included. It is 'an unforgivable sin'.[52] In support of this, Cassuto suggests it would have been inappropriate to detail 'so disgusting an act' in connection with Noah, the 'one who merited to be delivered from the waters of the Flood'.[53] After emphasising the serious nature of Ham's misdeed, Cassuto proceeds to describe it in terms of 'seeing' his father's nakedness, which would be 'an affront to the dignity of one's father'[54] and of speaking in a derisory manner about his father to his two brothers. He writes, 'The primary sin of Ham was his transgression against sexual morality, the disrespect shown to

44. Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Eerdmans, 1948), 302.

45. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 303.

46. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 302.

47. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 302.

48. Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: The Pentateuch (Genesis–Exodus)* (Edinburgh, 1864), 155–156.

49. Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis: Volume I* (Edinburgh, 1888), 293.

50. Speiser, *Genesis*, 62.

51. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II – From Noah to Abraham* (Magnes, 1964), 161.

52. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 151.

53. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 151.

54. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 151–152.

his father being only an aggravation of the wrong.'[55] Ironically, Cassuto states, 'We must not read into the Pentateuchal narrative more than it actually states, taking the words at their face value.'[56] Yet, his discussion of Ham's sin extends well beyond what the text of Genesis unambiguously states.

Derek Kidner views Ham's misdeed as a 'flagrantly unfilial act' that is 'the obverse of the fifth commandment'.[57] Adopting a similar view, Allen Ross identifies Ham's failure as seeing his father's nakedness, which was 'an affront to the dignity of his father'.[58] He writes, 'Ham's frivolous looking, a moral flaw, represents the first step in the abandonment of a moral code.'[59] According to Charles Aalders, Ham's sin is the 'disdain and disrespect' that he shows towards his father when he 'mockingly' shares his amusement at discovering his father naked.[60] Gordon Wenham asserts that Ham 'acts most dishonorably toward his father Noah',[61] behaving in a way that is improper and unfilial. According to Wenham, Ham fails 'to cover up his father's folly' and lacks discretion by publicising it to his brothers.[62] In Wenham's opinion, Ham is guilty of not quietly covering his father's nakedness, and then gossiping about it to his two brothers. A similar stance is adopted by David M. Carr, who writes, 'Ham (originally Canaan) fails to honor his father in his "seeing" of his father's drunken nakedness and telling of it (9:22).'[63]

Kenneth Mathews believes that 'Ham's reproach was not in seeing his father unclothed, though this was a shameful thing (cp. Hab 2:15), but in his outspoken delight at his father's disgraceful condition.'[64] With noteworthy candour, Robert Alter writes, 'No one has ever figured out exactly what it is that Ham does to Noah.'[65] Rejecting early Jewish proposals that Ham castrated his father or assaulted him sexually, Alter concludes that 'the mere seeing of a father's nakedness was thought of as a terrible taboo, so that Ham's failure to avert his eyes would itself have earned him the curse'.[66] This appears to be

55. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 152.
56. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 152.
57. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 111.
58. Allen P. Ross, 'Studies in the Book of Genesis, Part 1: The Curse of Canaan', *BSac* 137 (1980): 231.
59. Ross, 'Studies in the Book of Genesis', 230.
60. G. Charles Aalders, *Genesis*, BSC (Zondervan, 1981), 203.
61. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Word, 1987), li.
62. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 200.
63. Carr, *Genesis 1–11*, 285.
64. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Broadman & Holman, 1996), 419.
65. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (Norton, 1996), 40.
66. Alter, *Genesis*, 40.

a harsh judgement because the Genesis text does not exclude the possibility that Ham quickly averted his eyes and left the tent. If Ham's sin was his failure to look away from his naked father, we might have expected the narrator to emphasise in more detail Ham's action in looking at Noah. The concise style of verse 22 does not give the impression that Ham lingered long in the tent.

According to John Hartley, Ham's transgression involved 'shaming a parent'.[67] Ham does this by both seeing his father naked and then telling his two brothers, possibly bragging about what he had seen. Hartley contends that in antiquity 'shaming a parent was a serious offense, as evidenced by the death penalty for striking or cursing a parent (Exod 21:15,17)'.[68] In marked contrast to their brother Ham, Shem and Japheth acted honourably. A similar position is adopted by Jan Gertz, who, rejecting other options involving sexual abuse, writes, 'Ham's offense is rooted in seeing his father's shame (v. 22a) and then talking about it in front of his brothers (v. 22b).'[69]

Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredricks argue that Ham's offence is primarily 'homosexual, parent-dishonoring voyeurism'[70] but also includes his humiliation of his father by informing others of what he has done. Leon Kass adopts a similar outlook:

> Ham's first misdeed – a misdeed that tells the whole story – was his disrespectful invading of his father's private space. Be this as it may, his second act (telling his brothers) clearly shows that – for this son, at least – the seeing could just as well have been intentional. Ham looks upon his father's shame and *traffics* in it.[71]

Assessing these actions, Kass concludes that 'even the minimal misdeeds of looking and telling are … shocking and reprehensible'.[72] Driving home his revulsion at Ham's actions, Kass writes, 'To put it sharply, Ham's viewing – and telling – is metaphorically an act of patricide and incest, of overturning the

67. John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, NIBCOT 1 (Hendrickson/Paternoster Press, 2000), 113.

68. Hartley, *Genesis*, 113.

69. Jan Christian Gertz, *Genesis 1–11* (Peeters, 2023), 355, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.9165178.

70. Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001), 149.

71. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Free Press, 2003), 205. Italics in original.

72. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, n. 11. Kass notes that 'castration and homosexual rape have both been suggested'.

father *as a father*. Without disturbing a hair on Noah's head, Ham engages in father killing.'[73]

Acknowledging that there are uncertainties in the text, Bill Arnold considers the 'so-called voyeurism theory' to be a better solution than castration, paternal incest, or maternal incest.[74] Rejecting other options, Brad Embry also supports a voyeuristic interpretation of Ham's sin.[75] Conscious of the text's ambiguity, Iain Provan offers two possible suggestions, indicating a degree of uncertainty regarding Ham's sin: 'Perhaps the sin lies disguised in his "telling" of the incident to his brothers – is there perhaps mockery or slander implied in this language? Or is the idea that there is a lack of propriety in speaking of the situation to others rather than taking action to redress the situation.'[76]

Dismissing the guilt of voyeurism, incest with his mother, or a homosexual act with his father, Nicholas Odhiambo concludes, 'Ham's offense was not that he saw his father naked but that he neglected his responsibility to cover his father's nakedness.'[77] Similarly, rejecting proposals that involve sexual activity or voyeuristic pleasure, Andrew Steinmann concludes that 'Ham's sin was in not honouring his father by demonstrating discretion and loyalty.'[78]

Many scholars see Ham's sin as involving acts of indiscretion and shame. While opinions differ on how to interpret Ham's actions, there is a common understanding that verse 22 does not support interpretations that focus on sexual behaviour by Ham. Some interpret verse 22 as indicating serious moral failings, but others remain cautious, aware of the text's ambiguity or lack of clarity. The disagreement over the exact nature of Ham's crime is noteworthy, suggesting perhaps that the text can be read in different ways.

### 2.5 Undefined

In light of the limited information about Ham's actions recorded in 9:22, various scholars offer a cautious assessment of Ham's misdeed. John Skinner merely

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73. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 206. Italics in original.

74. Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 112, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807404.

75. 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 (2011): 417–433, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089210386345.

76. Iain W. Provan, *Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, Discovering Biblical Texts (SPCK, 2015), 125.

77. Nicholas Odhiambo, 'The Nature of Ham's Sin', *BSac* 170 (2013): 165.

78. Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 1 (IVP, 2019), 116.

describes it as 'an exhibition of juvenile depravity'.[79] Acknowledging that the text does not tell us what happened, Eugene Roop concludes that '"seeing" and "telling" involved Noah's sexuality. Whatever the precise action, the son saw the vulnerability of the parent and misused it.'[80] James McKeown acknowledges that 'the specific sin of Ham is not disclosed',[81] but nevertheless speaks of Ham's impropriety, which is reflected in his attitude and actions. However, McKeown does not discuss what this entails.

As this survey reveals, over the past two millennia, it has almost universally been accepted that the story of 9:20-27 in its received form presents Ham as a rogue.[82] Most commentators have unanimously denounced his inappropriate actions, although they differ widely in their assessments of what he did. The inability of scholars to identify Ham's misdeed suggests that consideration should be given to an alternative reading of the text. As we shall see, other aspects of the narrative raise doubts regarding the almost universal condemnation of Ham.

## 3. Who is Noah's 'youngest son', mentioned in 9:24?

The text of 9:24 presents a challenge for scholars who identify Ham as the culprit in the preceding verses. When Noah awakens from his drunkenness, he realises what his 'youngest son' (בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן – *beno haqqatan*) did to him. The reference to 'his youngest son' sits uncomfortably with the assumption that this denotes Ham. In every listing of Noah's sons in Genesis, Ham is always placed between Shem and Japheth, suggesting that he is not Noah's youngest son (5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18, 22; 10:1).[83] How can this order be reconciled with the

79. John Skinner, *Genesis*, ICC (T&T Clark, 1930), 182.

80. Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald Press, 1987), 77.

81. James McKeown, *Genesis*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary 1 (Eerdmans, 2008), 65.

82. As we shall see below, from Julius Wellhausen onward, a substantial number of scholars have maintained that in an earlier form of the story, the three sons of Noah were Shem, Japheth, and Canaan, with Canaan being the villain. A redactor subsequently substituted Ham for Canaan, based on an alternative tradition that listed Noah's sons as Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

83. While exceptions exist, the general convention in biblical Hebrew narrative is to list sons in order of birth. The listing of Jacob's sons in Exod 2:2-4 recalls Gen 35:23-26 and the birth order described in Gen 29:31-30:24 and 35:16-18, with the one exception that Benjamin, the son of Rachel, is named before the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, Jacob's other wives.

idea that verse 24 presents Ham as Noah's youngest son? Various theories have been proposed to resolve this apparent anomaly.

### 3.1 הַקָּטָן means 'younger', not 'youngest'

It is often noted that the LXX and Vulgate translations represent an early attempt to correct this discrepancy.[84] In these, the Hebrew adjective הַקָּטָן is rendered by terms that may imply 'younger' rather than 'youngest'. This suggestion supports the birth order of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Yet, as many scholars note, in a context where more than two are mentioned, הַקָּטָן takes on a superlative rather than a comparative sense (cf. 1 Sam 16:11).[85] This solution receives little support in modern scholarship.

### 3.2 הַקָּטָן implies 'unworthy'

An alternative solution has centred on the idea that הַקָּטָן should be understood as denoting the least in terms of moral behaviour. In *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.74, Philo proposes that Scripture 'allegorizes' here and 'takes the youngest to be, not the one who is so in age and time, but the one who is more youthful' (Marcus, LCL), that is, open to wickedness. A somewhat similar approach is found in Gen. Rab. 36.7, which interprets his 'smallest' son to mean his 'useless' son, drawing on the use of קָטָן in 1 Kings 8:64. This interpretation is repeated by Rashi, who writes: 'The unworthy and despicable one, as (Jeremiah 49:15) "For, behold, I make thee small among the nations, and despised among men" (Genesis Rabbah 36.7)' (Rosenbaum and Silbermann).[86] Referencing Rashi, Jacob renders הַקָּטָן 'his immature son', and consequently does not view Ham as the youngest of Noah's sons.[87] Although not his primary position (see below), Cassuto follows Midrashic exegesis by suggesting that הַקָּטָן alludes to Ham's 'moral degradation'.[88] While this approach fits with Ham being the second-born son, most modern scholars have not embraced this idiomatic reading of the text, favouring a more literal interpretation.

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84. LXX reads ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ὁ νεώτερος; Vulgate has *filius suus minor*.

85. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 164, comments that this approach 'does not conform to Hebrew usage'. See also, for example, August Dillmann, *Genesis, Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (Edinburgh, 1897), 306. See GK 133g.

86. Rashi writes: בנו הקטן הַפָּסוּל וְהַבָּזוּי כְּמוֹ הִנֵּה קָטֹן נְתַתִּיךָ בַּגּוֹיִם בָּזוּי בָּאָדָם

87. Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis: Abridged, Edited and Translated by Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob* (Ktav, 1974), 68. Jacob describes Ham as 'sein minderwertiger, verachtlicher, unreifer, bubenhafter Sohn' ('his inferior, contemptible, immature, boyish son'). *Das erste Buch der Torah: Genesis. Übersetzt und erklärt von B. Jacob* (Schocken, 1934), 264–265.

88. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 165.

### 3.3 הַקָּטָן means 'youngest'

Accepting that Noah refers to his youngest son in 9:24, some scholars have argued that the birth order of Noah's sons is not Shem, Ham, and Japheth, despite the frequent appearance of this order in 5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18, 22; 10:1. Without discussion, Josephus states that the order of birth is Shem, Japheth, and Ham.[89] Nachmanides (Ramban) suggests, 'The correct interpretation appears to me to be that Ham was the youngest of Noah's sons.'[90] In his commentary on Genesis 6:10, Nachmanides argues that Japheth was the eldest of Noah's sons, drawing on Genesis 10:21 and noting that this is reflected more generally in Genesis 10, which begins with the descendants of Japheth.[91] For Nachmanides, the birth order is Japheth, Shem, and Ham. To demonstrate that sons are not always listed in birth order, he cites 1 Chronicles 1:28, which places Isaac before Ishmael, and Joshua 24:4, which places Jacob before Esau. However, such exceptions are rare in the OT and are typically motivated by theological considerations. Among recent commentators on Genesis, Cassuto follows Nachmanides in arguing for the birth order Japheth, Shem, and Ham.[92] Like Nachmanides, Cassuto rests his case primarily on the fact that Japheth is described as the eldest in 10:21.

The idea that Japheth was the eldest is found in Gen. Rab. 26.2, which states 'Japheth who was the eldest',[93] and in Sanhedrin 69b, which records two different rabbinic arguments for Japheth being older than Shem. A few English translations of 10:21 (e.g. KJV, NIV) refer to Japheth as the older brother of Shem, viewing the adjective הַגָּדוֹל (*haggadol*) as an attribute of the substantive Japheth. However, Nachmanides's interpretation of 10:21 is not the

89. Josephus, *Ant*. 1.109.

90. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah*, 140. The original reads: וְהַנָּכוֹן בְּעֵינַי כִּי חָם הוּא הַקָּטָן לְנֹחַ. Apart from making Ham Noah's youngest son, Nachmanides contends that Canaan was Ham's eldest son. He writes, 'And as for the verse which states, And the sons of Ham: Cush, and Mitzraim, and Phut, and Canaan, [which indicates that Canaan was the youngest son], this was stated after he was sold to be a servant of servants; Scripture gave his brothers preference over him. Now when this event happened to Noah, Ham had no other children except Canaan. This explains the verse, And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw, for Ham had no other son then, and when he sinned unto his father, he cursed his seed' (p. 140). The original text reads:
וַאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וּבְנֵי חָם כּוּשׁ וּמִצְרַיִם וּפוּט וּכְנָעַן אַחֲרֵי נִמְכַּר לְעֶבֶד עֲבָדִים נָתַן לְכָל אֶחָיו מַעֲלָה עָלָיו וְכַאֲשֶׁר אֵרַע הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה לְנֹחַ לֹא הָיָה לְחָם זֶרַע זוּלָתִי כְּנַעַן וְזֶהוּ טַעַם וַיַּרְא חָם אֲבִי כְנַעַן כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֵּן אַחֵר וְכַאֲשֶׁר חָטָא לְאָבִיו קִלֵּל זַרְעוֹ

91. Commenting on the lists of Noah's descendants in Gen. 10, Nachmanides states that 'Scripture begins with Japheth for he was the oldest.' The original text reads: הֵחֵל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי הוּא הַבְּכוֹר

92. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 165.

93. The original reads: יֶפֶת שֶׁהוּא הַגָּדוֹל.

only possible reading of the text. It is perhaps more likely that in verse 21 the adjective modifies not the proper name Japheth but the construct noun אֲחִי (*akhi*), 'brother of', which refers to Shem. Nahum Sarna favours the reading 'older brother of Japheth', observing that 'an adjective does not usually modify a proper name in biblical Hebrew'.[94]

Aalders rejects the idea that 10:21 describes Japheth as older than Shem but suggests that Noah's sons were born in the order of Shem, Japheth, and Ham.[95] In defence of this, he proposes that the traditional order may be due to 'euphony when the three names are sounded together'. As an alternative explanation, Aalders suggests that the order of the names may have arisen from the Hamites' close affinity with the Shemites. Arnold speculates that 'Ham actually was the youngest in birth order, and the familiar list "Shem, Ham, and Japhet" simply reflects the Hebrew fondness for placing the shortest words first in a list.'[96]

However, as Keil and Delitzsch point out, if one accepts that the use of the superlative הַקָּטָן in 9:24 denotes Ham as the youngest of Noah's sons, this stands in contradiction with the use of הַגָּדוֹל in 10:21, which makes Shem the eldest of Noah's sons relative to Japheth, who must consequently be the youngest.[97] Alternatively, if הַגָּדוֹל is used as a superlative in 10:21 with reference to Japheth this would imply that Ham is the middle brother and Shem the youngest. Given the repeated use of the order Shem, Ham, and Japheth in Genesis, most scholars accept that this records the birth order of Noah's sons. With this in mind, the genealogical information in Genesis 10 proceeds from the youngest to the eldest of Noah's sons, concluding with Shem, through whom the patriline of Genesis will continue.

### 3.4 הַקָּטָן applied to Canaan as Noah's son in an alternative tradition

Many scholars have followed Julius Wellhausen's proposal that the present episode in 9:20-27 was created by combining two earlier traditions in which Noah's sons were listed variously as Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and as Shem, Japheth, and Canaan.[98] In the second of these traditions, Canaan was the son

94. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 78. See for example Jdg 1:13; 9:5; 2 Kgs 15:35; Jer 13:9; 36:10.

95. Aalders, *Genesis*, 204.

96. Arnold, *Genesis*, 113. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 164, rejects this approach.

97. Keil Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 156.

98. Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des alten Testaments* (Berlin, 1899), 12–13. For an extensive list of scholars who adopted

who saw Noah's nakedness and reported it to his brothers, Shem and Japheth. Wellhausen proposes that an editor combined the two traditions and introduced into the wording of verses 18 and 22 the phrase 'Ham the father of'.[99] This is the view adopted by Herman Gunkel, among many others, when he states that 'this legend originally names the three brothers Shem, Japheth, and Canaan'.[100]

While this approach has enjoyed extensive support, recent writers have highlighted its speculative nature. Westermann rejects this theory due to the absence of external evidence pointing to two traditions, one of which lists Noah's sons as Shem, Japheth, and Canaan.[101] By arguing for two traditions, Wellhausen creates, as Wenham notes, 'the problem that, whereas everywhere else in the Noah story and also in chap. 10 the sons of Noah are identified as Shem, Ham, and Japhet, in this passage alone are they named as Shem, Canaan and Japhet'.[102] The idea of two different traditions regarding the identities of Noah's sons raises as many problems as it solves. As Kenneth Mathews observes, this hypothesis 'is not satisfactory unless we accept an impossibly inept editor who left the contradiction'.[103]

### 3.5 הַקָּטָן applies to Shem

In a 13th-century commentary on Genesis, Hezekiah ben Manoah (also known as Chizkuni) proposed that 'youngest son' refers to Shem, and Noah's statement should be understood as referring to the kind deed done by Shem and his older brother Japheth.[104] As with some other Jewish commentators, Chizkuni assumes that Japheth is older than Shem based on Genesis 10:21. While this approach

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Wellhausen's approach, see Gene Rice, 'Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18-27)', *JRT* 29 (1972): 8–9.

99. David Frankel offers an alternative redaction-critical analysis, proposing that the story's original form, preserved in vv. 20-22a and 24-25, was an aetiological tale about Ham's drunkenness, with his son Canaan being the villain ('Noah's Drunkenness and the Curse of Canaan: A New Approach', *JBL* 140 (2021): 49–68, https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2021.0010).

100. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*. Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Mercer University Press, 1997), 79.

101. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (SPCK/Augsburg, 1984), 483–484. Frankel observes that David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 162–163, also rejects the approach of Wellhausen ('Noah's Drunkenness and the Curse of Canaan: A New Approach', *JBL* 140 (2021): 51–52).

102. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 197.

103. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 421.

104. Hezekiah ben Manoah, *Chizkuni: Torah Commentary*, trans. Eliyahu Munk (Ktav, 2013).

avoids the challenge of explaining how Ham is Noah's youngest son, there is no substantial evidence for Shem being Noah's youngest son.

### 3.6 הַקָּטָן applied to Canaan (as Noah's grandson)

While most scholars assume that Noah's mention of the 'youngest son' refers to Ham, there is a longstanding tradition that this refers to Canaan. Evidence of this comes in a commentary on Genesis by Ephraem the Syrian in the fourth century AD. He writes,

> Others, however, say that from that [sic.] the fact that Scripture says, Noah knew everything that his youngest son had done to him, it is clear that it was not Ham, for Ham was the middle son and not the youngest. For this reason they speak of the youngest son, who was Canaan, and say that Canaan the youngest told of the nakedness of the old man. Then Ham went out into the street and jokingly told his brothers.[105]

Ephraem proceeds to argue that Canaan's sin was greater than Ham's. For this reason, Canaan was cursed, and Ham received no blessing.

The medieval Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra offers a slightly different interpretation of the verse. Acknowledging that Genesis does not reveal what happened to Noah, Ibn Ezra identifies Canaan as the villain, not Ham. He suggests this sequence of events:

> Ham saw his father's nakedness and unlike his brothers did not cover him. On the contrary, he revealed what he saw. Canaan heard that Noah was lying naked in his tent and did something to Noah. However, the Bible does not tell us what he did to him.[106]

Having argued that Canaan did something to Noah, Ibn Ezra goes on to establish that Canaan was the youngest of Ham's sons, according to Genesis 10:6. To support his contention that Canaan is the culprit, Ibn Ezra suggests that in verse 24 when Noah realises what 'his youngest son' had done to him, the 'his' denotes Ham, not Noah.[107]

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105. Ephraem Syrus, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward G. Mathews Jr and Joseph P. Amar (Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 145.

106. *Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Pentateuch*, trans. and annot. by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (Menorah, 1988–2004). The translation paraphrases the Hebrew text to make it more intelligible to readers. The original reads:

וכן היה כי חם ראה ולא כסהו כאשר עשו אחיו רק גלה הדבר ושמע כנען ולא נדע מה עשה

107. The original reads:

וטעם בנו הקטן לעד כי כן הוא אומר ובני חם כוש ומצרים ופוט וכנען גם ו״ו בנו שב אל הם הנזכר על כן קלל כנען

Adopting a somewhat similar approach, Shufelt proposes that הַקָּטָן refers to Canaan based on the understanding that he is Noah's youngest grandson.[108] As he rightly observes, the term בֵּן (*ben*) is sometimes used in Genesis to denote a grandson (e.g. Gen 29:5 in light of 24:47 and 28:5). On the assumption that Canaan is the one who has done something inappropriate to Noah, Noah's immediate response makes good sense. He curses Canaan (9:25). Identifying Canaan as the culprit removes any need to explain why Noah curses Canaan and not Ham. Of all the possible interpretations of הַקָּטָן in verse 24, this appears the most likely in the light of verse 25.

## 4. Why is Canaan, rather than Ham, cursed by Noah (9:25)?

For scholars who maintain that Ham is the culprit, Noah's cursing of Canaan is a highly troubling aspect of the story in 9:20-27. Why does Noah's curse fall on Canaan, who is supposed to have had no involvement in his father's misdeed? And why is Canaan the only one of Ham's sons to be cursed? As the narrative stands, Noah appears to commit a grave injustice, punishing a son for his father's actions. Unsurprisingly, various reasons have been formulated to account for this apparent inconsistency in the story.

### 4.1 Canaan is cursed because Noah had previously blessed Ham (9:1)

One of the earliest known explanations for the cursing of Canaan centres on the observation that God blessed Noah and his sons after they left the ark (Gen 9:1). In light of this, it is argued that Noah could not subsequently curse Ham. This view is presented in the *Genesis Pesher* from Qumran (4Q252, Frag. 1 Col. 2):

> And Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' And he did not curse Ham, but rather Ham's son, because God had already blessed the sons of Noah.[109]

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Strickman and Silver's translation reads: 'The meaning of the verse *and (Noah) knew what his youngest son had done unto him* is proof that Canaan was the culprit, for we read, *And the sons of Ham: Cush, and Mizraim, and Put, and Canaan* (Gen. 10:6). Furthermore, the *his* in *his youngest son* refers to Ham, who is previously mentioned. That is why Noah cursed Canaan.'

108. J. Ernest Shufelt, 'Noah's Curse and Blessing: Gen. 9:18-27', *CTM* 17 (1946): 740. In Genesis 10:6, Canaan is listed as the last of Ham's sons.

109. Michael Wise et al., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 354. The original text reads:

ויקץ נוח מיינו וידע את אשר עשה לו בנו הקטן ויומר ארור כנען עבד עבדים יהייה לאחיו
ולא קלל את חם כי ברך אל את בני נוח

While expressed in a slightly vaguer way, the same idea may have prompted Josephus to write 'Noah, on learning what had passed, invoked a blessing on his other sons, but cursed – not Ham himself, because of his nearness of kin, but his posterity.'[110]

The same explanation is found in Gen. Rab. 36.7, which asks the question 'Should Ham be the one who sinned yet Canaan [his descendant] be cursed?'[111] In response, the text says, 'R. Judah said, "It is because it is said, 'And God blessed Noah and his sons' (Gen. 9:1). Now there cannot be a cursing where there has been a blessing. Accordingly, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan'."'[112]

The same tradition is briefly noted by Ephraem the Syrian, who writes, 'Some say that because Ham had been blessed along with those who entered the ark and came out of it, Noah did not curse Ham himself, even though his son, who was cursed, grieved him greatly.'[113] However, rejecting this approach in his commentary on Genesis 9:24, Ibn Ezra remarks, 'The one who says that Ham was the culprit, and that Canaan was cursed because Noah did not want to curse his son (Ham) because God had blessed Noah's sons, is indulging in Midrash' (Strickman and Silver).[114]

### 4.2 Canaan participated in the misdeed

Another ancient explanation holds that Canaan was no innocent party but was actively involved in the misdeed. For this reason, he was cursed. The earliest record of this comes in Philo's *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 2.70:

> Why does (Scripture) not simply say, 'Ham saw the nakedness' instead of 'Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father'? It convicts both the son through the father and the father through the son, for in common and as one they have committed an act of folly, wickedness and impiety and other evils. (Marcus, LCL)[115]

A somewhat similar explanation possibly comes in Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 23, which attributes to Canaan the crime of castrating his grandfather: 'Canaan

110. Josephus, *Ant*. 1.142.

111. The original text reads: חָם חָטָא וּכְנַעַן נִתְקַלֵּל

112. The original reads:
רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אָמַר לְפִי שֶׁכָּתוּב וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת נֹחַ וְאֶת בָּנָיו, וְאֵין קְלָלָה הֲוָה בִּמְקוֹם בְּרָכָה לְפִיכָךְ וַיֹּאמֶר אָרוּר כְּנָעַן

113. Ephraim Syrus, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, 145.

114. The text reads:
והאומר שקלל נח את בן בנו בעבור שבירך אלהים את בניו זה דרך דרש

115. In *QG* 2.65 Philo says that Canaan 'practised peculiar evils of his own'. Later, in *QG* 2:77, Philo adds, 'Both father and son practised the same wickedness.'

entered and saw the nakedness of Noah, and he bound a thread (where the mark of) the Covenant was, and emasculated him. He went forth and told his brethren' (Friedlander).[116]

This interpretation is noted as a possibility in Gen. Rab. 36.7, which records: 'R. Nehemiah said, "It was Canaan who saw and informed the others. Therefore the curse is assigned to the one who is ruined."'[117] Rashi notes the same tradition: 'Some of our Rabbis say that Canaan saw it and told his father about it, and on that account, he is mentioned in connection with this matter and was cursed (Gen. Rab.).'[118] While few modern scholars have adopted this approach, Sarna speculates that Canaan 'was a participant in the offense against Noah, a detail omitted here on grounds of delicacy and on the assumption that the original story was well known to the reader.'[119] We shall return to this proposal later.

### 4.3 Ham's fourth son is punished because Ham castrates Noah

A further explanation is that Ham castrated Noah, thereby preventing him from having a fourth son. Gen. Rab. 36.7 attributes this idea to Rabbi Berekhya, who said:

> Noah in the ark was most distressed that he had no young son to take care of him. He said, 'When I shall get out of this ark, I shall produce a young son to take care of me.'
> B. When Ham had done the disgraceful deed, he said, 'You are the one who stopped me from producing a young son to to [sic] take care of me, therefore that man himself [you] will be a servant to his brothers.'[120]

A further statement in Gen. Rab. 36.7 adds: 'Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yosef: He said to him: "You prevented me from producing a fourth son;

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116. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1916). The original reads: וְנִכְנַס כְּנַעַן וְרָאָה אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וְקָשַׁר חוּט בְּבְרִיתוֹ וְסֵרְסוֹ וְיָצָא לְהַגִּיד לְאֶחָיו

117. The original reads:
רַבִּי נְחֶמְיָה אוֹמֵר כְּנַעַן רָאָה וְהִגִּיד לְחָם לְפִיכָךְ תּוֹלִין אֶת הַקְּלָלָה בַּמְקֻלָּל

118. The original reads:
יֵשׁ מֵרַבּוֹתֵינוּ אוֹמְרִים כְּנַעַן רָאָה וְהִגִּיד לְאָבִיו לְכָךְ הֶזְכַּר עַל הַדָּבָר וְנִתְקַלֵּל

119. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text*, 64.

120. The original text reads:
הַרְבֵּה צַעַר נִצְטַעֵר נֹחַ בַּתֵּבָה שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה לוֹ בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְּשַׁמְּשֶׁנּוּ אָמַר לִכְשֶׁאֵצֵא אֲנִי מַעֲמִיד לִי בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְּשַׁמְּשֵׁנִי כֵּיוָן שֶׁעָשָׂה לוֹ חָם אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה אָמַר אַתָּה מָנַעְתָּ אוֹתִי מִלְּהַעֲמִיד לִי בֵּן קָטָן שֶׁיְּשַׁמְּשֵׁנִי לְפִיכָךְ יִהְיֶה אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ עֶבֶד לְאֶחָיו

therefore, I am cursing your fourth son.'"[121] The difficulty with this proposal lies in the absence of evidence supporting the claim that Ham castrated his father.

### 4.4 Canaan is cursed to add to the severity of Ham's punishment

Focusing on the idea that the cursing of Ham would have a limited impact, Nachmanides proposes that Noah deliberately curses Canaan to impact future generations.

> Now if Noah had said, 'cursed be Ham, a servant of servants shall he be,' the punishment would have been only his since the seed already born to him is not part of him, and perhaps Ham would no longer beget children. In that case Noah would not have taken his vengeance of him for who knows what shall be after him. Therefore, he cursed the son he had. Even if he will later beget a hundred children, it is enough that the oldest son – and all his seed with him – were cursed.[122]

In line with this proposal, Nachmanides views Canaan as Ham's eldest son. Adopting a similar stance, Dempster writes, 'The fact that Canaan, the "son" of Ham, is cursed, and not Ham, shows the biblical understanding that the curse registers an impact on the generations. Humanity is an interconnected whole.'[123] A significant weakness of this approach is its failure to explain why Ham's other sons are not cursed.

### 4.5 Canaan is cursed because he is the offspring of maternal rape

Scholars who favour the idea that Ham raped his mother have suggested that this proposal offers a suitable rationale for Noah's cursing of Canaan. According to Bassett, if Ham had sexual intercourse with his mother, this would 'explain why Noah cursed only one of Ham's several sons, if it is further assumed that Canaan was the fruit of such a case of incest.'[124] Bergsma and Hahn adopt a similar stance:

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121. The original text reads:
רַבִּי הוּנָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי יוֹסֵף אָמַר לוֹ אַתָּה מְנַעְתָּ אוֹתִי מִלְּהַעֲמִיד בֵּן רְבִיעִי לְפִיכָךְ אֲנִי מְאָרֵר בֵּן רְבִיעִי שֶׁלְּךָ

122. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah*, 140. The original text reads:
וְאִם אָמַר אָרוּר חָם עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יִהְיֶה לֹא יִזִּיק רַק לְגוּפוֹ כִּי הַזֶּרַע שֶׁכְּבָר נוֹלַד אֵינֶנּוּ בְּכָלְלוֹ וְאוּלַי לֹא יוֹלִיד וְלֹא לָקַח מִמֶּנּוּ נִקְמָתוֹ כִּי מִי יוֹדֵעַ מַה יִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו עַל כֵּן קִלֵּל הַבֵּן שֶׁהָיָה לוֹ וְאִם יוֹלִיד מֵאָה דַּי שֶׁיְּקֻלַּל בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר וְכָל זַרְעוֹ אִתּוֹ

123. Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Apollos/IVP, 2003), 74.

124. Frederick W. Bassett, 'Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?', *VT* 21 (1971): 235.

> If Ham's deed is understood as maternal incest, it becomes possible to explain Canaan's origin as the fruit of that union. This insight suddenly illuminates two aspects of the text left unanswered by paternal-incest theorists: why Canaan is cursed, and why Ham is repeatedly identified as 'the father of Canaan'. Canaan is cursed because his origin was a vile, taboo act on the part of his father.[125]

This approach goes some way to explaining why Canaan is singled out for special attention, but it rests on the tenuous premise that Ham raped his mother, for which the text of Genesis 9 offers no clear evidence. If the issue of Canaan's incestuous origin was of importance to the narrator of Genesis, he provides no obvious information to highlight this.

### 4.6 Canaan is cursed to justify the suppression of the Canaanites

Some scholars explain Noah's cursing of Canaan from the perspective of how the Canaanites are portrayed negatively in other biblical passages. Alter remarks, 'The whole story is made to justify the – merely hoped-for – subject status of the Canaanites in relation to the descendants of Shem, the Israelites.'[126] While it seems likely that, in Genesis, the cursing of Canaan is related to later passages concerning the Canaanites, this approach does not explain why Ham is portrayed as misbehaving. If the primary purpose of the narrative is to castigate the Canaanites, it seems inappropriate to condemn them alone because of Ham's actions. Why are Ham's other sons excluded?

As with other aspects of this episode, there is no scholarly consensus as to why Noah curses Canaan. This issue is especially awkward for those who maintain that Ham is the sole culprit. Scholars who view Canaan as a partner in crime partially resolve the problem, but the question remains: why does Ham escape punishment?

## 5. An alternative reading

Over the past two millennia, a verdict of guilty against Ham has been virtually unanimous in the jury of biblical scholarship.[127] Almost all commentators assume that Ham has committed a grave sin. Remarkably, however, no consensus exists regarding Ham's crime, and a wide variety of proposals have been offered to explain his offence against his father. These are based on the two activities described in 9:22: Ham saw Noah's nakedness and told his

125. Bergsma and Hahn, 'Noah's Nakedness', 35.

126. Alter, *Genesis,* 40.

127. Two rare exceptions are Shufelt, 'Noah's Curse and Blessing', 737–742, and Thomas O. Figart, *A Biblical Perspective on the Race Problem* (Baker Books, 1973), 56–57.

brothers, Shem and Japheth. Scholarly views on Ham's sin have ranged from accusing Ham of castrating his father to homosexual activity with his father, to incest with his mother, to voyeuristic pleasure, to dishonouring his father by speaking inappropriately about his naked condition. Yet, all these suggestions, without exception, go beyond what the text of verse 22 states. In each instance, we have *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*, as ideas are read into the text of Genesis, often drawing on other biblical passages.

However, if we start with the supposition that Ham is innocent, nothing that is said in verse 22 contradicts such a possibility.[128] Verse 22 may be read as saying that Ham saw his father naked and reported this to his brothers outside the tent where Noah was lying. Without Ham's revelation of his father's nakedness to his brothers, they too might have accidentally seen their father's nakedness. If Ham's actions are viewed as entirely honourable, the text of verse 22 fittingly conveys this: nothing needs to be changed. Viewed in a less favourable light, Ham might be considered negligent in not covering his father, but he may not have had the means of doing this. In any case, such negligence falls far short of the other charges that have been laid at his feet.

This reading of the text requires no ingenuity or imagination to explain what Ham did. The text may be read literally without imposing an idiomatic interpretation on what is said. Moreover, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, the text never suggests that Ham's actions should be contrasted with those of his brothers. Had the author wished to contrast the brothers' behaviour, it would have been possible to break the waw-consecutive sequence at the start of verse 23 by placing the names of Shem and Japheth before the verb. This would have signalled an essential contrast between Ham's actions and those of Shem and Japheth. As to why Ham did not cover his father's nakedness, we can only speculate. Did he panic and rush out in fear? Or perhaps there was no suitable garment available inside the tent to cover Noah.

Scholars openly acknowledge the difficulty of identifying Ham's sin, with some candidly admitting that the narrative lacks explicit details.[129] The simplest explanation of verse 22 is that Ham did nothing wrong, and notably, the rest of the episode favours his innocence. In support of this, three factors suggest that the true villain may be Ham's son, Canaan.

Firstly, and most obviously, Canaan is the one cursed by Noah. As we have noted, scholars struggle to explain why Canaan is cursed for a misdemeanour performed by Ham. Moreover, Noah's condemnation of Canaan is not limited

128. A presumption of innocence is the starting point in most judicial systems.

129. As Ibn Ezra remarks in his commentary on Genesis 9:24, הכתוב לא גילה מה נעשה ('Scripture does not reveal what was done.')

to verse 25. After Noah states that Canaan will be עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים (*eved avadim* – 'a servant of servants') to his brothers, Noah proceeds to announce in verses 26-27 that Canaan will be the עֶבֶד ('servant') of Shem and Japheth, his uncles. While verses 26-27 are often taken to be a 'blessing' that Noah pronounces on Shem and Japheth for their discretion in covering him, both verses emphasise Canaan's status as their slave. Noah's remarks are not meant to be read as blessings on Shem and Japheth, contrasting with the curse of verse 25. Instead, Noah's words reinforce the curse upon Canaan. While verse 25 speaks of him being a 'servant of servants' to his brothers, verses 26 and 27 extend this to include his uncles. In light of this, there is no reason to assume that the lack of any reference to Ham in verses 24-27 is an indication that he mistreated Noah. Since he is the father of Canaan, it would be redundant for Noah to state that Canaan would be Ham's עֶבֶד. This would be expected of a loyal son.

Secondly, one of the unusual features of 9:18-27 is the brief remark that comes in verse 18, identifying Ham as the 'father of Canaan'. Remarkably, this information is repeated in verse 22. The presence of this description in verses 18 and 22 is noteworthy, especially given that Ham is the father of three other sons and Canaan is not his firstborn (10:6). Why, we might ask, is attention drawn to Canaan at this stage in the narrative? Undoubtedly, these references connect Canaan with Noah's cursing of him in verse 25, but could they serve a further purpose? Might it be that the introduction of Canaan in verse 18 is deliberately intended to alert the reader to his significance in this episode? Observing the 'emphatic introduction of Canaan' in verse 18b, and noting the references to Canaan in verses 22, 25, 26, and 27, Jan Gertz writes, 'Verse 18b thus provides the theme of the narrative, which should be read primarily as a story about Canaan, its absent but ever-present main character.'[130] As we have observed, verses 21-23 lack clarity regarding what may have happened to Noah when he was drunk. Furthermore, the actions of Ham, Shem, and Japheth can all be interpreted without attributing any guilt to them. Might it be that out of respect for Noah, having portrayed him in a most positive light before this episode (Gen 6:9), the narrator intentionally leaves the reader in the dark as to how Noah was abused? From the narrator's perspective, it is sufficient for the reader to know that something happened without going into the specifics. While we can only speculate as to the narrator's intention, he may have expected observant readers to wonder why Canaan is mentioned, apparently unnecessarily, in verses 18 and 22. Eventually, the reason for this becomes evident in verses 24-27.

130. Gertz, *Genesis 1–11*, 352. Strikingly, of all the characters in 9:18-27, Canaan is named more often than anyone else, including Noah.

Thirdly, Canaan is a suitable match for the reference to Noah's 'youngest son' in verse 24. As occurs elsewhere in Genesis, the Hebrew noun בֵּן may denote a grandson (e.g. 29:5; 31:55 (Heb. 32:1)). Consistent with this, Canaan is listed in 10:6 as Ham's youngest son, following Cush, Egypt, and Put. On the evidence of verses 24-27, the finger of guilt points directly at Canaan. Moreover, the narrative presents this information as coming from Noah, the injured party. Given this evidence, as noted above, some scholars have argued that Canaan was a co-conspirator with Ham. Others have speculated that the present episode is based on an earlier story that listed Noah's sons as Shem, Japheth, and Canaan. Both proposals lack firm evidence and have significant weaknesses, but they share a common understanding that Canaan acted nefariously. Although Noah does not name Canaan in verse 24, he does so immediately afterwards in verses 25-27.

After centuries of being wrongly accused, an alternative reading of Genesis 9:18-28 suggests that Ham deserves to be rehabilitated as a loyal son of Noah who acted honourably towards his father. Nothing said about him warrants a negative assessment of his behaviour. The case for exonerating Ham and restoring his reputation is strong, despite 2,000 years of traditions that have condemned him. If this alternative analysis of the episode is correct, Ham should no longer be held guilty for actions that appear to have been undertaken by his son, Canaan. As for the nature of Canaan's actions, we can only speculate. Most likely, given the sensitive nature of what may have occurred and out of respect for Noah,[131] the narrator intentionally avoids being specific. Nevertheless, as others have suggested, the episode points the finger of blame more clearly at Canaan than at Ham.

Unravelling the Gordian knot that binds together the uncertainty regarding Ham's sin (v. 22), the identity of the youngest son (v. 24), and the reason for Canaan's punishment (vv. 25-27) has proved difficult. The history of interpretation of Genesis 9:20-27 reveals the complexity of finding a suitable solution. Perhaps the time has come to cut the knot and break with tradition by exonerating Ham of all wrongdoing and identifying Canaan as the sole guilty party. While the mystery of how Noah was abused remains, this is by far the most straightforward solution to the problems raised by this short episode.

131. It should not be forgotten that Noah has been portrayed as 'a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time' (Gen 6:9). See T. Desmond Alexander, *Genesis*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Lexham Academic, 2025), 155–156.

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