

# The Sin of Ham & the Curse on Canaan

*An Exposition of Genesis 9:18-29*



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When Noah stepped off the ark, he stepped into a whole new world of fresh opportunities. He was, in some respects, a second Adam. The effects of sin were soon apparent, however. The old man Noah, formerly known as a “preacher of righteousness” provided an opportunity for immorality. Ham, his “little son” had been preserved in the flood by the grace of God but “the ark had nourished a monster.”

At 600 years old Noah planted a vineyard, perhaps a return to what he had previously done. Noah, however, became drunk with the wine of his vineyard and in his drunken stupor “uncovered himself,” leaving an avenue open for the sin of others around him. There is no doubt that Noah sinned in this, but the Holy Spirit puts the emphasis on the sin of Ham, not Noah.

## **What was the sin of Ham?**

This passage contains a number of problems, concerning Ham’s sin. First, the curse on Canaan and not Ham, and then the nature of the curse itself. Many nineteenth-century interpreters focus on the words “*a servant of servants*” (vs. 25) which led to the belief that the curse of Canaan was on black Africans. This interpretation suited the western world at that time, but it is a very wrong

misinterpretation, which has for the most part been abandoned, although, like a thick stink, it still hangs in the air in some places.

So what was the sin of Ham? Some think that Ham simply looked at his father's nakedness or perhaps, a disrespectful gaze and later mockery. Modesty is important to the Lord. It is hard to conceive, however, that God pronounced a curse of such magnitude because Ham 'saw' his father naked, even with the extended sin of disrespect and slander. The text suggests something more sinister than a mere look. There was actual sin involved. Ham "did" something (vs. 24b).

**First**, Moses linked the sin of Ham with the sin of the Canaanites. Consider when Moses was writing this and the phrase, "*Ham the father of Canaan*" (vs. 22). Moses singled out Canaan because he was writing for the Israelites who were about to enter Canaan, a land filled with unprecedented sexual perversion. The Israelites were aware of the sins of the Canaanites. They were commanded to "*utterly overthrow them*" (Exodus 23:24) and "*have no pity upon them*" (Deuteronomy 7:16). Moses singled out Canaan then, to link the sin of Ham with the sin of the Canaanites. Ham did sin with his father, but Ham would also influence his son, Canaan.

**Second**, Moses uses a word that relates to acts of immorality and sin in other parts of Scripture.

Consider the words, Ham “*saw the nakedness of his father*” (vs. 22). The word “*saw*” has a wide range of nuances, including to look on with enjoyment, desire or lust. It is used of David when he saw Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2), of Eve when she “*saw that the tree was good...pleasant...to be desired*” (Genesis 3:6 *emphasis added*). The verb is also used as a euphemism to refer to a sexual relationship (Leviticus 20:17; see also vs 18-19).

**Third**, Ham, not only “*saw*” but “*did*” something to his father. The text indicates that Noah was conscience that something “[*was*] *done*” to him (vs. 24). The language used indicated that Noah “*perceived (by experience).*”

In light of these considerations, it seems more likely that Ham “*discovered his father in a state of drunkenness and apparently initiated a homosexual relationship with him.*” At the very least Ham looked on his father and got some perverse gratification—perhaps in the fantasies of his imagination, but most likely an actual physical encounter. Ham was not content to perversely enjoy his sin in private, he came out of the closet,

as it were, and opened up to his brothers the thoughts of his depraved mind.

## **Why was Canaan Cursed?**

So, why was the curse placed on Canaan rather than Ham who had actually sinned. This form of punishment is found throughout the Bible and is called by scholars, "talionic justice"—punishment in kind, or to use the words of Jesus "an eye for an eye."

To put it very simply, Ham sinned against his father, so Ham will be punished through his son (Ham's sons will sin against him). Or we could put it this way—Ham's punishment will be the knowledge that his son Canaan will be a great sinner and will be punished for that.

We should remember that Noah is under the spirit of prophecy here and sees the characters of all of his sons. By the spirit of prophecy Noah saw in Canaan the same sin as his father committed.

Ham "is punished in *this* son, because he followed most decidedly the example of his father's impiety and wickedness." It seems clear also, that the curse was not so much on the person of Canaan as it

applied to the wicked descendants of Canaan—the Canaanites, whom Moses tells the Israelites to destroy.

The curse on Canaan is fulfilled in the subduing of the Canaanites during the conquest under Joshua, when the iniquity of the Amorites was full (Genesis 15:16). David and Solomon put the remaining Canaanites in forced service to Israel (Joshua 9:23; II Samuel 5:4-10; 1 Kings 9:20-21), fulfilling the prophecy of Genesis 9:25 *“a servant of servants shall he be...”*

The Noah/Ham saga provides us with a deeper understanding of the story of Israel entering the “Promised Land” and their interaction with the Canaanites. The Israelites were commanded to utterly destroy the Canaanites, “without pity.”

As they go into the land then, under the leadership of Joshua they were doing so with this curse of Canaan in their mind—they knew the sin of Ham, the depravity of his son Canaan and the escalation of that sin in his descendants. After hundreds of years of grace and prosperity in a land described as “flowing with milk and honey” and with only increasing sin, the iniquity of the Canaanites would be full (cf. Genesis 15:16) and God would use the

Israelites as instruments to deal with the sons of Canaan. This was the curse on Canaan.