**‘Why Did Noah Curse Canaan?’**

***20And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. 21Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. 22And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. 23But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness.***

***24So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. 25Then he said:  “Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren.” 26And he said: “Blessed be the Lord, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. 27May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.”***

***28And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. 29So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.***  Genesis 9:20-29 (NKJV)

This is one of the most bewildering passages in the Bible. Ham has sinned against his father, Noah. He is the guilty party. Why does Noah curse Canaan, who is Ham’s son?[[1]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1) There are a number of things going on in this passage which need to be addressed.

The first thing to consider is HOW the passage is presented to us in many English translations. We must remember that “neither ancient Hebrew nor Greek writings had punctuation marks.  Interpreters have to make their best educated guesses about how to add punctuation when they translate those texts into English.”[[2]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2)

With this in mind, let me suggest another way to write verses 24-29.

***24 So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him.***

***25[And] he said:  “Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren.” 26 And he said: “Blessed be the Lord, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. 27 May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.” 28 And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. 29 So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.***

The way most English translations present these verses gives us the indication that Noah immediately cursed Canaan upon waking from his drunken stupor. This isn’t necessarily so. It is entirely possible that there was a long time gap between verse 24 and verses 25-29. It could be that these words aren’t spoken by Noah until right before his death. **In the same prophetic manner** that Jacob (Israel) blessed his sons just before his death, Noah prophesies to Canaan, Shem, and Japheth.[[3]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3) This would be appropriate considering that Noah’s sons and their wives would fill the earth with their descendants, just as Jacob’s sons and their wives would build the nation of Israel. If these words were spoken right before Noah’s death, Noah would have been able to prophesy over Canaan words appropriate to him in light of the circumstances of his birth and because he had had many years to observe his life and character.

I’ve removed the word “Then” from verse 25 as it is given to us in the New King James Version of the Bible, and replaced it with the word “And.” The reason for the change is to let it become **obvious** that the first Hebrew word in verses 25 and 26 ױאמר is identical. For the translators to translate this word as “then” in verse 25 but then use the word “and” in verse 26 for the exact same word leads to confusion. Using the word “then” leaves the reader with the impression that Noah immediately cursed Canaan, when Canaan may not have been alive at the time of Ham’s offensive actions. Though, with the translator’s choice of wording, it appears that he is.

Let’s ask the question, ‘What did Ham do?’ There are three traditional views regarding what is being reported in the text.

1. The first view is **voyeurism**. Ham saw his father’s naked body. The weakness of this position is that there aren’t any taboos or laws against coming upon someone and seeing their naked body in biblical law or Ancient Near Eastern law. This view also does not account for how Canaan was cursed rather than Ham.
2. The second view is **castration**. This is a view held by many rabbis. When Noah lay drunk and naked in his tent, Ham seized the opportunity to castrate his father in order to usurp his father’s authority. But, there is nothing in the Hebrew which can confirm that this in what happen. This also does not explain why Ham was not cursed but Canaan is.
3. The third view is that Ham committed **paternal incest**. This view holds that Ham sexually abused his father. How proponents of this view arrive at their conclusion is based upon the understanding that the phrase, “he saw the nakedness of his father.” This an idiomatic expression for sexual intercourse. [[4]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4) Heiser believes that those who hold this view get the idiom somewhat correct, but they misapply it. If Ham violated his father sexually, then the question remains, ‘Why is Canaan cursed?’

Heiser suggests that there is **a fourth view**, a better view; one which extends from the Bible itself. He explains that the language of the Hebrew in Genesis 9 is a Hebrew idiom. “To see” (the Hebrew word is *ra’ah*) the nakedness (the Hebrew word is *‘erwah*) of someone is idiomatic. It’s an expression for sexual intercourse. We know this from Leviticus 20:17. There we read,

***17 “If a man takes his sister, his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter, and sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a wicked thing. And they shall be cut off in the sight of their people. He has uncovered his sister’s nakedness. He shall bear his guilt.”***

“The key here is to understand that “uncovering nakedness,” which describes the act of removing clothing from the genital area for the purpose of sex, and “seeing nakedness” is equated in this passage.”[[5]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5) The two expressions are similar, though two different verbs are used. We get clarity on what’s going on in Genesis 9 if we read a verse from Leviticus 18. This section of Leviticus is essentially a holiness code on sexual morality or immorality. The entire chapter is worth reading. But for our purposes, only one verse is needed. That verse is verse 7 which states, ***“You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.”*** (ESV)[[6]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6)

Heiser goes on to say, “In Old Testament, Semitic, patriarchal culture, the nakedness of a man was defined as the woman that belongs to him.”[[7]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7) “To uncover a man’s nakedness means to have sex with the woman who belongs to him….What we have in Genesis 9 is not paternal incest. What we have in Genesis 9 is *maternal* incest….Ham had sex with Noah’s wife. Ham had sex with his own mother. That’s the problem. That is the crime.”[[8]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8) Ham is pretty proud of himself and boasts about what he’s done to his brothers. They want nothing to do with his crime. In fact, by their walking backwards to cover their mother makes it clear that they don’t even want to look at her naked body. Their father commends them. Ham’s son Canaan, however, receives an extensive curse because Canaan was the product of Ham having sexual intercourse with his mother. By cursing Canaan, Noah was letting everyone know that Canaan would not become the inheritor of family leadership. He was excluded because his birth was illegitimate and was the result of Ham’s attempt to usurp his own position as leader of the family. Noah is angry because Ham is raising up competitive seed through his father’s wife, with the intent of taking control of the family and then passing it on the his illegitimate son, Canaan.[[9]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9) This view, as Heiser[[10]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn10) has explained it, clarifies what is going on in this passage and does answer the question, ‘Why did Noah curse Canaan?’ This could also be the reason Canaan is identified as Ham’s son early in these verses. By making this connection early, there is no question that Canaan is Ham’s son, though his mother was Noah’s wife.

Given the information we have, the translator’s “best guess” in punctuating this ancient text is quite possibly inaccurate. This has brought confusion to the text rather than clarity.

*Kathleen*

[[1]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) Much of the information in this blog can be found at <http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com/naked-bible-159-noahs-nakedness-the-sin-of-ham-and-the-curse-of-canaan/>. “Michael S. Heiser is the teacher in this podcast. He is a scholar in the fields of biblical studies and the ancient Near East. He is the Scholar-in-Residence at Logos Bible Software. Mike earned the M.A. and Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2004. He has also earned an M.A. in Ancient History from the University of Pennsylvania (major fields: Ancient Israel and Egyptology). Mike can do translation work in roughly a dozen ancient languages, among them Biblical Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Ugaritic cuneiform. His academic specializations include Israelite religion (especially Israel’s divine council), contextualizing biblical theology with Israelite and ancient Near Eastern religion, Jewish binitarianism, biblical languages, and Second Temple period Jewish literature.”

[[2]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20101120120952AASDMAe&guccounter=1>

[[3]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) Genesis 49

[[4]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) Heiser, p. 4.

[[5]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) Heiser, p. 5.

[[6]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) ESV is the English Standard Version of the Bible

[[7]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref7) <http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NB-159-Transcript-1.pdf> p.8.

[[8]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref8) Heiser, p. 9.

[[9]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref9) Heiser, p. 11.

[[10]](http://yourbibleblog.com/2019/01/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref10) Heiser isn’t alone in his explanation to what Ham did. John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn have written the paper “Noah’s Nakedness and Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)” <http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Hahn-Bergsma-Noahs-nakedness-and-the-curse-on-Canaan.pdf>