

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 159

Noah's Nakedness, the Sin of Ham, and the Curse of Canaan

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Episode Summary

The episode of Noah's drunkenness in Genesis 9 has long befuddled interpreters. One of Noah's sons, Ham, commits some heinous crime against his father. Oddly, though, Ham is not the one cursed by his father. Instead, Ham's son Canaan bears the wrath of Noah. This episode explores the traditional solutions to the interpretive confusion and offers an alternative based on recent research in the Hebrew text.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 159: Noah's Nakedness, the Sin of Ham, and the Curse of Canaan. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you doing this week?

MH: Pretty good. How are you?

TS: I'm doing good! I'm excited for another good episode. I like these topical episodes. It's a nice break from the book, which we'll be voting on very soon. Maybe in the next couple weeks or so, we'll post it up there so people can vote on the next book that we get into. But until then, I'm enjoying these topical episodes.

MH: I think you're just looking forward to Noah's nakedness here. I think you've got a mascot now! Is Noah going to be our mascot? (laughs)

TS: I've got to take it, right?

MH: There you go. Yeah, well, this is one that I think (if memory served) that we actually touched on some of this is in a Q&A, and I think that's probably where I said we need to do a whole episode on this or something like that.

TS: Correct.

MH: So here we are. For newsletter subscribers, I have uploaded an article that I think, to date, is the best treatment of this issue. I think I'll read a couple things in

the article, but basically the research here that I'm going to present to you and try to make it decipherable for a lay audience really depends on and comes from this article. It's by John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn. The article is entitled, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan." It's from the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 124:1 (2005):25-40. If you're a newsletter subscriber, you will have access to the protected folder and you can get that article and read it. There are a lot more details than what we'll cover here. But I'm going to give you the basics and hopefully explain clearly why this problematic passage in Genesis 9 really does have a good answer. There is a way to make sense of this.

Let's just start off by reading the passage. This is going to be Genesis 9:18-25. Let's just jump in here. I'm using the ESV.

¹⁸ The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹ These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.

²⁰ Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. ²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. ²³ Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said,

**“Cursed be Canaan;
a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.”**

This is a familiar story, and it's one that's really puzzled people for a long time. Once we go through this material, I think you're going to see how if you're not tuned in especially to idiomatic expressions in biblical Hebrew, it's very easy to misinterpret this passage. So I'm hoping by the end of it you'll draw that conclusion or see what I mean by that statement.

Let's talk about how this passage has been approached traditionally. There are three traditional views held by various Jewish groups or sects (Jewish sources) or, of course, Christian interpreters over the long course of time.

1. The first view is voyeurism. This is the idea that in what I just read, the sin of Ham was just looking at Noah's naked body. The problem here is that it was forbidden—there's some taboo about looking upon nudity and that's the sin that Ham commits. He embarrasses Noah and then Noah curses

Canaan. This has been popular since antiquity. The strength of the position... I'll just read part of the article. On page 27, they write this:

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The strength of this position is its conservatism: it refuses to see anything in the text that is not explicit. Yet, in a sense, voyeurism is a non-explanation, since it fails to elucidate either the gravity of Ham's offense or the reason for the curse of Canaan. It also requires the interpreter to assume the existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent that is otherwise unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature. Donald J. Wold remarks, "Scholars who accept the literal view... must defend a custom about which we know nothing."

So there you go. You walk into a tent and you see your dad there naked unexpectedly, and that merits the cursing of your son, Canaan? It just seems like it's overkill. Again, we don't really have any evidence that it was taboo to just come upon someone's naked body and see them and then you were in big trouble. There's nothing like that in biblical law or Ancient Near Eastern law. Nevertheless, this has probably become the leading traditional view, and it really derives from the statement that Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father. That's really where it comes from. So simple voyeurism is probably the leading traditional view. Its primary weakness, other than not having a law or anything in the Bible that would just say this was awful, is that it really doesn't explain the curse on Canaan at all.

2. The second view is castration, believe it or not. This is the idea that Ham goes into Noah's tent and castrates him. This is a rabbinic idea. You'll see this in rabbinic discussion about the passage. To quote Bergsma and Hahn.. in their article they provide just a little snippet of an explanation or comment here. They say:

... one can cite examples from ancient Near Eastern mythology (although none from the Bible) of a son castrating his father as part of an effort to usurp his authority... [This view] also provides some rationale, albeit complex [MH: I think that's a generous term. I think it's pretty strained, personally.], for the cursing of Canaan: Noah curses Ham's fourth son since Ham deprived Noah of a fourth son. What is lacking, however, is any lexical hint in the text of Gen 9:20-27 that would suggest castration.

Basically, it comes down to the fact that there's no evidence in the text that Noah was castrated, so that's a big problem. And the explanation of Canaan's cursing is pretty strained. It has to assume that Noah wanted a fourth son. Again, there's nothing that actually says that.

3. The third traditional view is one that is pretty common. (Castration is probably the least common of these today. Usually it's voyeurism or this next one. But a lot of people hold to this position, as well.) That is that the sin of Ham is paternal incest. In other words, Noah was sexually abused by Ham. There's a homosexual violation here. Gagnon, in his otherwise excellent book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, actually takes this view. I don't take the paternal incest view, as will become evident as we go on. There are really secure biblical textual reasons for not taking this view, but Gagnon takes this view. He's very influential in the discussion of the Bible and homosexuality. Again, it's an excellent book, but I disagree with him on this point here. He's sort of representative that this has a pretty good, solid following.

The basis of this idea and its problems... let's just give a quick overview. If you go to Genesis 9:24, you read a phrase to the effect that Noah saw "what his son had done to him." That suggests (and I would agree with this point) that we have some crime committed here that goes well beyond just accidentally seeing nakedness. In other words, it goes well beyond voyeurism. Proponents of this will say, "Look, something was done to Noah here. It's not just seeing the nakedness." They would sort of think logically and ask what could be done to Noah that would be so bad, and then eventually they're going to get to a sexual violation.

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You say, "How do they get there?" Well, here's how you get there. The phrase that describes what Ham does/did ("he saw the nakedness of his father") is an idiomatic expression for sexual intercourse. That's true, and we'll talk about what that means and how we know that's the case in a moment, but let's stick with what this view says. So we have an idiom here. "Saw the nakedness of his father" is an idiom for sexual intercourse. So the view argues that, "Okay, since we know this and something was done to Noah and we do the math and put the two things together and Ham sexually abuses his father, we have paternal incest."

As you're going to find out, the view of the two authors of the article that I posted in the folder (and my own view—I think they're right because I think their argument is very persuasive)... I think this view gets the idiom somewhat correct but then misapplies it. If we go with the homosexual violation here, it doesn't explain *again* why Canaan is cursed. Why isn't Ham cursed if Ham sexually violates his father? Why isn't Ham the one that's in trouble? Why isn't Ham the one that's cursed? "When he saw what his son had done to him..." Noah knows who did what, but then he doesn't curse Ham—he curses Canaan. Ham is never cursed in the passage.

Let me just pause there. In part of my distance ed teaching I have an assignment that's based on this passage, and I'm amazed at how many students just don't know that last point. They assume that Ham is the one that gets cursed. He's not! Read the passage. Canaan is the one that gets cursed, not Ham. And if Ham is sexually violating his father, that just doesn't really sound reasonable. Let's just be honest. So we have a problem here, even though this is a popular view. We have a problem with why Canaan gets cursed and nothing is done to Ham in the passage.

I would suggest that there's a better view to understand this that actually extends from the biblical data. The paternal incest view gets part of this right, but then misapplies what is being seen in the text. So here we go.

Let's just start with the idea of the Hebrew idiom in this phrase, "see the nakedness of his father." For those of you who may not know (or may not want to admit), you may not be familiar with what an idiom is. What is an idiom? An idiom is an expression. Let me give you an example in English. If I say, "The issue of abortion is a hot potato" you're never going to understand what I mean by doing word studies on the words "hot" and "potato." You could have everything that Mike's ever said and written and concord it and search for the words "hot" and "potato," and you're *never* going to understand what I mean by that expression. So an idiom is an expression that sort of has to be known within a cultural context. If you combine the words "hot" and "potato" in that sentence ("the issue of abortion is a hot potato") and you're familiar with the cultural context and how that phrase/combination gets used, then you're going to be able to understand (and I'm sure everyone in the audience does understand) that when I say the issue of abortion is a hot potato, what I mean is that the issue of abortion is really explosively controversial. You know that, not because you've studied the words "hot" and "potato." You know that because you're part of the culture. You're part of the group that would just know what that expression means by experience. So an idiom is an expression.

What we have in Genesis 9 is, indeed, 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. Now how do we know that? If we go to Leviticus 20:17, we read this:

¹⁷ "If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity."

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" are equated in this passage. Did you notice that? We have the idiom

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"to see the nakedness of" and "sees her nakedness" and that's parallel to "uncovering nakedness." Similar expression, but with two different verbs: see and uncover. That's important because if you actually searched for the phrase "uncovering nakedness" (there the Hebrew word is *galah*), you're going to find passages that very clearly and explicitly show that uncovering nakedness is a reference to sexual intercourse. Once you discern that, then you go back to Leviticus 20:17 and say "Aha! Uncovering nakedness is to have sex, and that's in parallel with seeing nakedness, so that must also mean to have sexual relations." So this is what we're dealing with.

Let's just back up a little bit. Listen to the "uncovering nakedness" terminology in Leviticus 18. This is section of Leviticus in which we have essentially a holiness code on sexual morality or immorality. Let's start in verse 6:

⁶“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. ⁷You 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. ⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. ⁹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. ¹⁰You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. ¹¹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. ¹²You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. ¹³You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. ¹⁴You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. ¹⁵You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law; she is your son's wife, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ¹⁶You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. ¹⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. ¹⁸And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

This idiomatic expression "to uncover nakedness" also occurs in Ezekiel 16. We spent a good deal of time there. Again, it's a very sexually explicit passage. In Ezekiel 16:35-37, we read this:

³⁵“Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the LORD: ³⁶Thus says the Lord GOD, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, ³⁷therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness.

In the context of Ezekiel 16, it's very sexual in orientation. Ezekiel 22:10 has the same idea. Let's just go there. Again, we're focused on the phrase "uncover nakedness."

¹⁰In you men uncover their fathers' nakedness; in you they violate women who are unclean in their menstrual impurity.

He's speaking to the city here. It's a reference to sexual intercourse with people you shouldn't be having sex with. Ezekiel 23, next chapter. We'll start in verse 10. It's talking about Jerusalem/Judah's relationships with the Assyrians.

¹⁰These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and as for her, they killed her with the sword; and she became a byword among women, when judgment had been executed on her.

¹¹“Her sister Oholibah saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring, which was worse than that of her sister.

Again, it's a very clear sexual context. You go down to verse 18:

¹⁸When she carried on her whoring so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned in disgust from her sister.

Verse 29... Again, the sexual context is very clear:

²⁹and they shall deal with you in hatred and take away all the fruit of your labor and leave you naked and bare, and the nakedness of your whoring shall be uncovered.

The context is pretty clear. Uncovering nakedness is clearly—if you go back to Leviticus 18, it's just over and over and over again with forbidden sexual relationships—an idiomatic expression for "to have sex with." Since that

phrase/idiom is used in parallel in Leviticus 20:17 with "to see nakedness," scholars (and I would agree) would say that both of them are idiomatic expressions for the same thing. To see someone's nakedness is that same as to uncover someone's nakedness. They're both a reference to "have sex with."

To this point, this is the argument of the paternal incest view—the homosexual violation view. People will go to Genesis 9 and they'll say, "Look, what Ham did is he saw the nakedness of his father. Since we know that 'see the nakedness of' is a euphemism for having sex, he had sex with his father. This is a homosexual violation; it's paternal incest." But that misses something in Leviticus 18. Let me read it again. You're going to see what we're tracking on here. We do not have homosexual intercourse here. We have heterosexual intercourse going on. I'll give you that heads-up. Listen to Leviticus 18 again:

⁶“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. ⁷You 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. ⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; *it is your father's nakedness*...

¹⁰You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness...

¹⁴You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach *his wife*; she is your aunt...

¹⁶You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness.

What this phrase means (to uncover the nakedness of your father), it actually means "don't mess with his wife."

⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother;

In Old Testament, Semitic, patriarchal culture, the nakedness of a man was defined as the woman that belongs to him. So that's why Leviticus has this wording. To us it sounds very confusing, but if you understand the idiom, it's not.

⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother...

Okay? Don't uncover the nakedness of your father's wife. Why? Why shouldn't I uncover the nakedness of my father's wife? Because it's your father's nakedness! "Well, I thought it was my father's wife... Oh, that's right—it is." Because to uncover a man's nakedness means to have sex with the woman who belongs to him. That's what's missing in this whole discussion. It's very clear that to see nakedness and to uncover nakedness are both idioms for sexual intercourse. But then people will take that and go back to Genesis 9 and they'll say, "Look, 'see nakedness'—that means to have sex with, and look at what Ham does!"

²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father...

Again, the voyeurists say he's just looking at Noah's naked body, but the paternal incest view will say, "Look, he saw the nakedness of his father. He had sex with his father." No, what it actually means, if you go back to Leviticus... to see the nakedness of your father or of any particular man (your brother) is to take that man's woman/wife sexually. What we have in Genesis 9 is not paternal incest. What we have in Genesis 9 is *maternal* incest. This idiom (either one—to see nakedness or uncover nakedness) is never used in the passages that condemn homosexuality. It's not an idiom that's used for homosexual violation or intercourse. There you have terms like *shakab* ("to lie with" another man). This idiom (to uncover a man's nakedness) is saying, "Do not have sex with the woman who belongs to that man. Don't do that." Again, if you don't know that or see that, then you're going to get a homosexual violation in Genesis 9, where what you should be getting 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.

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Let's just think about the story. Shem and Japheth walk... Ham is like, "Hey, guess what I just did. I had sex with mom. I had sex with our father's wife, our father's woman." Noah is, of course, the patriarchal head of the family, and we're going to talk about the meaning of what Ham does, but he goes out and tells his brothers. What do the brothers do? They walk backwards and cover their father's nakedness, which I'm suggesting the idiom says is their mother. They go in and refuse to look at her naked body, for sure (because they're backwards), but they cover it. Why do they do it this way? Why do they do what they do and do it this way? The account telegraphs a very commendable gesture. The gesture distances them from any sense of either mutual lust or approval of what Ham had done. It puts a significant barrier between them. It's going to cast them as the good guys here. What about verses 20 and 21?

²⁰ Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent.

Doesn't "his tent" suggest that Ham had sex with his father? Ham goes into *Noah's* tent. The assumption is that Noah is the only one there to have sex with.

Actually not. Just think with me. There's going to be a textual issue here, but just think with me logically. Noah's wife could have been in Noah's tent (if it is Noah's tent). They could have had sex as a couple and then Ham comes in and does what he does to his mom. Or maybe Noah got drunk, passed out, and Ham comes in there and seizes the opportunity. Noah can't defend his wife, Ham's mom. Any of those scenarios could account for the "his tent" terminology. But there's actually a textual issue here. In Hebrew, what gets translated "his tent" here is *oholo* (אֹהֶלָה). It should be translated "her tent" because we have the noun *ohel* with a suffix (third feminine singular suffix), which is the 'h'... *oholo*. This is a third feminine singular suffix on the noun. It should be translated "her tent." The Masoretes actually suggest a "correction" here. A third masculine singular suffix would be the letter *waw* instead of the letter *he* that's actually here in the text. So that's where scholars will come across this and say the Masoretes thought it should be "his tent," so that's what we're going to translate it, even though in the text it's really "her tent." I'm suggesting that we should just stick with the text as we have it written here. Ham finds them in *her* tent. So if Noah was in there, all these scenarios I just described apply, as well. It doesn't really matter whose tent it is at the end of the day because if Noah is passed out or incapacitated or whatever, Ham is going to be taking advantage of his mother. So the reference to Noah's tent really doesn't do anything because logically it doesn't matter and it actually should be translated "her tent" anyway.

Proof of this (other than grammar, and the morphology is what it is—it is a third feminine singular ending) is Genesis 24:67. Here's how the English has it. This is the Isaac and Rebekah story:

⁶⁷ Then Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

In Hebrew, here's what we actually have literally. For those who know Hebrew:

וַיָּבֵ֣אָהּ יִצְחָ֑ק הָאֵ֙הֶ֔לָה שָׂרָ֖ה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רֵבֶ֑קָה
וַתְּהִי־לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּֽאֱהָבֶ֑הּ וַיִּנְחַם יִצְחָ֑ק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ׃

Literally, it is "Isaac brought her (Rebekah) into her tent, the tent of Sarah, his mother." The point is that Sarah was dead and Isaac apparently is living in her tent, or at least her part of the bigger patriarchal tent complex there. So he brings Rebekah home and he takes her into his mother's old tent space, her old living

space, and that's where they're going to live. So we have the same form. *Ohel* is the Hebrew word for tent, and we have the third feminine singular suffix on it, and it's very clearly a reference to a woman's tent here in Genesis 24:16. It's Sarah's old tent, but of course, she's now deceased.

30:00 To summarize (and then we're going to move on to talk about what the meaning of all this is), what we have in Genesis 9 is Ham, I would suggest, goes to his mother's tent... We don't know how the tent structure was set up. If you're nomadic and patriarchal, you have a big tent and it's divided into compartments (which incidentally, is the meaning of "in my house are many mansions"—that's part of this whole kind of thing). You live with your parents, just in different parts of the complex. He goes into his mother's living space and apparently, Noah is there, maybe he and his wife had sex. They were both drinking wine. Maybe that was preparatory to that. Or maybe Noah passed out or whatever. We don't know. Noah is incapacitated, though, when Ham shows up and violates his mother. We have maternal incest. That is the crime.

You ask, "How does that explain the cursing of Canaan?" It actually does. The maternal incest view is the only view that actually has a coherent explanation for the cursing of Canaan instead of Ham. You say, "How?" It goes this way: Canaan was the product of the incestuous union. The passage tells us twice (sort of proleptically telegraphs the fact) that "Ham was the father of Canaan." That's Genesis 9:18 and 22. By cursing Canaan, Noah telegraphed to everyone that Canaan would not become the inheritor of family leadership. He was excluded because his birth was illegitimate and the result of Ham's attempt to usurp his own position as leader of the family. Noah is angry because Ham is (to use biblical or King James language) raising up competitive seed through his father's wife, with the intent of taking control of the family and then passing it on to his illegitimate son, Canaan.

There is strong scriptural precedent (and ancient Near Eastern precedent, but we're going to stick to the scriptural precedent) for this idea. Reuben did this with Bilhah (Genesis 35:22, Genesis 49:3-4). But the even better examples are when you get to the monarchy. Then you have a real issue of succession. So in 2 Samuel 12:8, we have an account where David, to legitimize his position, took Saul's wives and concubines. This was right after the Bathsheba thing. I'll just go back up to verse 7, where Nathan is scolding David. After his little parable about the ewe lamb, Nathan said to David in verse 7:

⁷Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. ⁸And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.

He's giving it to David here. God is saying through the prophet, "I made you king!" This was part of the culture. This was how you solidify your dynasty—you have sexual relations with the competitor's wives and concubines. This is what you do. This was done to *David* later on by Absalom. There's an infamous scene in 2 Samuel 16:20-23. This is the scene (kind of a notorious scene in the Old Testament) where Absalom publicly does this to David's wives and concubines. I'll just read the passage:

²⁰Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give your counsel. What shall we do?" ²¹Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house, and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened." ²²So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof. And Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

Again, he does this because he's usurping David as king; he's usurping David's office. Later, in 1 Kings 1-2, David has this almost happen to him again. Remember when David was old, they gave him a concubine named Abishag to keep him warm because he was old? She sleeps with the king. When David is about to die and there's a question of succession... Some, of course, have engineered the circumstances where Solomon becomes the next king, but Adonijah (another son) had a serious backing in 1 Kings 1. In verses 13-25, Adonijah tries to take David's concubine sexually. Again, this is what you *do* to solidify this dynastic transition. This, again, is part of Israelite culture and part of patriarchal culture before that. This is something that, when we read Genesis 9... Ham, by doing this, is laying claim to the leadership of the family. In this view, he is going to have this particular son take over. And Noah says, "Forget it. I'm going to exclude Canaan. He is going to be a servant to all of the brothers." So he is cursed. This is why Canaan gets cursed. It is a second-handed punishment of Ham, but it's a really devastating one because Canaan is going to outlive Ham. That's why Canaan becomes the target, because he is illegitimate.

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Let me read a little bit from Bergsma's and Hahn's article on this point. They say:

The objection has also been raised that w. 24-25 imply that Noah pronounced the curse on Canaan immediately...

It feels like a chronological disconnect, where Noah sees what happens and says he's going to curse Canaan, but the kid hadn't even been born and they don't even know Noah's wife is pregnant. It feels a little odd and this is the objection.

The objection has also been raised that w. 24-25 imply that Noah pronounced the curse on Canaan immediately, before the nine months necessary for him to be born according to the maternal-incest theory. But the narrator may have simply compressed the chronology at this point, as he does elsewhere. After all, Gen 5:32 ("After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth") should not be taken to mean that Noah's wife bore triplets shortly after his five-hundredth birthday.

In other words, you have to read that into it. Sometime after Noah was 500 years old, he has three boys. There's no hint in the text that they're triplets is the point. So you can have these kinds of comments (especially in Genesis, to be honest with you) in narrating family history. It doesn't include all the events so that it's an exhaustive chronology of events. That's their point here. They're saying this isn't really a good objection to the maternal incest idea (this supposition that Noah wakes up and just starts cursing the kid when he doesn't even know she's pregnant yet). It's just an added detail that because of what happened here, Canaan is going to get cursed.

To wrap up the episode, if you want more objections and their answers to this kind of thing, you can go read the article. Of the maternal incest view, I would say that it's not a perfect argument. In other words, it's not going to answer everything with the kind of precision that you would wish for. But personally, I think that this view (this option for understanding what happens between Noah and Ham and Canaan in Genesis 9) is far and away the most coherent understanding of the sin of Ham and the cursing of Canaan. Frankly, none of the other traditional views has the same explanatory power, especially when it comes to why Canaan is the target. So I think the maternal incest view is the best view. Again, I'm giving you the article if you want to read it. They do a good job of interacting with the other views. I've distilled the information here, but the key to it is to recognize the idiom—to see nakedness and to uncover nakedness are similar idioms for the same idea: to have sex with. And if you actually go to where "uncover nakedness" is most often and most thoroughly used in the biblical text, you find out it's not used of a homosexual violation/relationship. It's consistently the idea that to see or uncover your father's nakedness (that's the language of Genesis 9... "Ham saw the nakedness of his father"), that this language actually refers to having sexual relations with the woman who belongs to that particular man—in this case, the father. If you see that and you recognize it, this is far and away, I think, the best view because it honors the Hebrew idiom and it is able to explain why Canaan is the target of Noah's anger.

TS: Mike, what can you tell us about this passage or the sin of Ham being used to promote slavery?

MH: It was part of a sort of matrix or complex of ideas used in Europe and, of course, America to justify targeting the Negro race, the Hamitic races, and then

subjugate them to slavery. The real hard part of that, of course, is Ham isn't cursed (laughs). He is not cursed in the passage! There are lots of reason why that justification of slavery is ridiculous. Frankly, other biblical arguments to justify slavery are pretty dumb. I'll just be bluntly honest: some of them depend on truly bad exegesis. I have a whole lecture that I call "Biblical Racism." I gave this in Missouri over a year ago when we went for an *Unseen Realm* event, plus other topics that people wanted to hear about, and this is one of them. It derives from the whole problem of... I'll try to keep this really short. In the Age of Discovery in Europe, when Europeans were crossing the Atlantic and going to other parts of the world and finding humans in lands that aren't mentioned in the Bible... It was like, "Hey, what is this place? It's not part of what the Bible says the world is, the nations of the world in Genesis 10." Again, they were dark-skinned (darker than the white Europeans). People thought they were answering this whole problem of how we get human beings in other parts of the world that aren't in the Bible, they came up with theories about other races besides the Adamic race. There was Co-Adamism (other humans besides/alongside Adam), other humans before Adam. It was part of answering the long ages... This time in history (the 1500's-1800's), there's all sorts of things going on in the Age of Discovery. You're discovering new lands, human beings in these new lands, you're discovering ancient texts and having them deciphered (Sanskrit, cuneiform, Egyptian), all this stuff that has alternative histories and alternative stories of human origins. Geology is becoming a science at this point (talking about the earth being millions of years old). You have Darwin in the mid-19th century. You have a bunch of forces that are converging, and out of that came some really, truly bad Bible interpretation. The racial issue is one component of that. This passage in Genesis 9 was used as part of the alternate Adamic humanity answer to how we get these other people. "Surely, the Europeans are the race that is the most close to Adam because we inherited the Bible, we inherited the Judeo-Christian worldview, we inherited what used to be the Roman Empire, which was Christianized!" So all of these non-sequitur leaps of logic kind of concatenate together into racial theory. People who went to Genesis 9 said, "Where did Ham's ancestors go? Oh—down there in Africa! Well, Ham was just awful." And, of course, assuming... This sounds unbelievable, but people just don't read the text. It's very clear here that Ham committed a crime, but then they talked about the fact that Ham was cursed and he deserves to be in bondage, in slavery. Well, Ham never gets cursed in the passage! But it doesn't matter and it didn't matter. They had their theories and that was good enough. They had what they thought were their biblical answers to these issues, and "Don't mess with me, I have the answer now! I get to keep the integrity of the Bible... because we've got to find all this other stuff in the Bible, or else we have to just junk the Bible. We've gotta come up with all the answers for all the questions that these new discoveries are throwing at us." And so, they did terrible Bible interpretation. This is where the "Lost Tribes of Israel" stuff is born—in the same hotbed of ideas. It's just truly awful, in all sorts of ways—not only intellectually, nonsensical, but we all know the terrible stuff the racial thing created.

So yeah—this gets used a lot. There are whole books on how this Genesis 9 passage was used to justify this. Some will also say this whole thing about the mark of Cain—that this must have been blackness. Really? "Okay, sounds good to me! Let's go with that, that he's marked and cursed and that justifies slavery, too." You get some truly bad Bible interpretation. Bible interpretation actually matters, folks. It has mattered in the history of Western Civilization. And the slavery issue, unfortunately, is probably Exhibit A on how tragic ideas can extend from bad Bible interpretation.

TS: Yeah, it's pretty ridiculous that they'll justify slavery with that.

45:00

MH: To try to be fair, people came up with just awful ideas, ridiculous interpretations that have no basis in the reality of the text taken in its own context, but many of them weren't motivated by hate. There were racial hate-mongers that seized upon these things and then used them to justify slavery. But a lot of other people thought that they had to go this route to keep their faith. "We've got to find this stuff in the Bible somewhere. We've got to interpret the Bible somehow to account for this, otherwise we can't look at it as true." So for many people, it wasn't a question of "Oh, I hate blacks. Let's go put them in bondage." No, the question was, "Our leadership/pastors/scholars are telling us this is how we need to read our Bible here. The Bible is still correct and it's just unfortunate if you're one of these lesser races. God be with you." It was that kind of thing. So it's sort of a passive and then a more active hate-thing going on. It wasn't all the same thing. It's just unfortunately. It's unconscionable at the end of the day. It's history. These are the paths that you go. We can lay a lot of the slavery issue at the feet of people doing bad Bible interpretation. That's just a demonstrable fact, as uncomfortable to some that it might be. That's true. It's true.

TS: Mike, a thousand years from now when people are listening to this podcast, how are they going to interpret it when I say that this show is uncovering the Bible's nakedness? How are they going to hot-potato that one?

MH: (laughing) Maybe there will be more biographical information on you on the internet, then they'll just read that and say, "Okay, we understand now."

TS: So basically we've learned two things here. We have a new slogan: "Uncovering the Bible's Nakedness."

MH: (Big sigh) Didn't we just say something about doing bad stuff with the Bible?

TS: Yeah. And the code word is "hot potato."

MH: Yeah? We're just going to ignore that! (laughing)

TS: Anytime I say something... you're going to say "hot potato." That's our new code word.

MH: All right. That'll be our new little... I don't know... Is "meme" the right word there? I don't know.

TS: There you go, I don't know. So if I get out of line, just say "hot potato." Then let the guys translate that a thousand years from now. See if they can figure it out.

MH: Let them deal with that.

TS: That's right. All right, Mike, next week we're going to do another Q&A. And then with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.