

CURRENT CRITICAL QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE “CURSE OF HAM” (GEN 9:20–27)

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More than a hundred years ago John Buchan, the prolific Scottish novelist, put the following words into the mouth of one of his youthful characters: “The Bible says that the children of Ham were to be our servants. If I were the minister I wouldn’t let [that black man] into the pulpit. I wouldn’t let him farther than the Sabbath school.”¹

It might be assumed that social advancements in the twentieth century have put to rest this rather twisted way of reading Scripture. But ample testimony continues to confirm a readiness to interpret Gen 9:20–27 in a way that denigrates the black man. It has been reported that part of the defense’s argument in a recent murder trial depended on an appeal to this passage. On a broader scale, Ethiopian Christians have reported that the Communists who dominated their country for a number of years based one of their anti-Christian propaganda arguments on this passage from Scripture. Why should the Ethiopians have any sympathies for the Bible, since Christians teach that Africans are an inferior race as a consequence of the curse of Ham? Clearly a reexamination of the so-called “curse of Ham” as found in the book of Genesis is needed.

The setting for this linking incident in the narrative is simply presented (Gen 9:18–19). After reporting the confirmation of God’s covenant with Noah by the sign of the rainbow, the narrative names Shem, Ham and Japheth as the sons of Noah. These three sons presumably will be the heirs of the covenantal blessing of preservation. But a special point is made of the fact that Ham is the father of Canaan (v. 18b). Then it is noted that the three sons of Noah will be the source of all other inhabitants of this world that are to be scattered across the earth. These seemingly innocuous transitional remarks set the stage for the long-term future of the nations of the world.²

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¹ J. Buchan, *Prester John* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994) 9. The continuing confusion over the words of Genesis may be seen in the explanatory note by D. Daniell to this reference in Buchan’s novel: “According to Genesis, chapters 9 and 10, one of Noah’s three sons, Ham, was the father of Canaan and thus was the ancestor of Arab nations, particularly those in north Africa. The account . . . mak[es] such descendants ‘servants of servants’” (ibid. 209). Considering the vast ethnic diversity of the Arab world, it hardly could be established that the Bible represents them as descendants of Canaan and under a curse.

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984) 2.141, notes that this section of Genesis is unified by a reference at the beginning to the “scattering” of the nations as they descended from the three sons of Noah (Gen 9:18–19) and a reference at the end to the “scattering” of the nations at Babel (11:9).

Both coming judgments and blessings are implied in these transitional verses. Noah's seed shall multiply and fill the earth, but they also shall be scattered in disharmony (cf. 11:9).

The prophetic words spoken by Noah about his sons and their descendants originate in this context. It may have been in ignorance of the stupefying effects of wine that Noah fell into a state of drunkenness and exposed himself in his tent. Yet his lack of knowledge would not of itself provide an excuse for his abuse of the good things that God had created.³ Being found in this lowly condition, he was further shamed by his son Ham, while his immodesty was covered by his other two sons, Shem and Japheth. With this background in mind, three important questions may be examined in greater detail.

I. WHAT WAS THE SIN OF HAM?

Basically two alternatives may be suggested regarding the sin of Ham. One perspective suggests that Ham sinned by a disrespectful treatment of his father. Ham rejoiced at finding his father in a drunken, depraved state and jubilantly announced this condition to his brothers. Rather than publicizing his father's shame, Ham should have kept this knowledge to himself.⁴

An alternative interpretation proposes that Ham's sin was a sexual one. If Ham's sin was of a sexual nature, the actual transgression could be understood in various ways. It could be understood simply as a blatant gazing on the nakedness of his father, in contrast with the respectful modesty of his brothers. This interpretation may be favored by other passages in the Law of Moses that forbid looking on another's nakedness. A priest was not allowed to go up steps to make sacrifices on the altar, so that his nakedness would not be uncovered (Exod 20:26). Modesty was expected to characterize the people of the covenant Lord. This understanding of the nature of Ham's

³ Some commentators have found nothing sinful about Noah's drunkenness; e.g. B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 139: "That Noah *became drunk* (vs. 21) is a simple statement of fact, not a moral judgment." His drunkenness is described by Vawter as a social gaffe, not a crime. At the same time he regards Noah's nakedness as "a shameful thing in itself." More accurate to the text is the comment of D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1967) 103 n. 1. In evaluating Noah's guilt or innocence that may have hinged on his awareness of the potency of wine, Kidner notes that the RSV's translation "Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard" is quite unwarranted and that the most the Hebrew allows is "Noah, the tiller . . . , was the first to plant a vineyard." The text reads literally "Noah, (the) man of the soil, began and planted a vineyard." Kidner notes that "began and" occurs only here and in Ezra 3:8 and that the similar "began to" means "was the first to" in only 4 of the 40 instances in which it occurs. The NIV is quite sufficient and adequate in its rendering: "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard." The text is unclear as to whether Noah at this time was aware of the potency of wine, although it would seem that due to the passage of time he most likely was. Says G. Ch. Aalders: "In our judgment, there is no basis for excusing Noah from responsibility for his actions" (*Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981] 202).

⁴ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 200, proposes that the Israelites would have agreed with the Ugaritic Aqhat epic "which states that a son should take his father 'by the hand when he's drunk, carries [*sic*] him when he's sated with wine' (A 1:32-33, ANET, 150)"—that is, he should do his best to cover up his father's folly, which is exactly what Ham did not do.

sin also is supported strongly by the countertreatment of Noah by Ham's two brothers. Shem and Japheth move backward into the tent with a cloth in hand to cover their father's nakedness. As they inch backward within the darkening folds of the tent, they are most careful not to gaze on their father's shameful nakedness.

But the phrase "looking on a person's nakedness" could refer by way of circumlocution to a sexual sin of a graver nature.⁵ Other passages in the Pentateuch use virtually identical language as a way of referring modestly to a sexual sin. An Israelite man must not take his sister so that he "sees her nakedness" (Lev 20:17). This prohibition seems clearly to forbid more than a man's simply viewing his unclothed sister. The next verse speaks of a man's "uncovering the nakedness" of a menstruous woman (20:18). The context suggests something more than simply looking on the nakedness of a woman during the time of her monthly period. Still again, the following verse forbids "uncovering the nakedness" of an aunt, which once more suggests more than merely looking at the nakedness of a close relative (20:19).

In these verses from Leviticus, "to uncover the nakedness" of someone apparently serves as a circumlocution for having sexual relations with that person. The NIV renders each of these verses with this meaning.

The phraseology of these prohibitions in Leviticus concerning sexual relations approximates very closely the language used to describe the sin of Ham. "Looked on the nakedness of his father" parallels "look on (a woman's) nakedness" or "uncover (a woman's) nakedness." By that action Ham committed a most grievous sin. He discovered his father in a state of drunkenness and apparently initiated a homosexual relationship with him. The modesty of the Biblical mode of expression is understandable and parallels the use of the term "to know" a person when referring to the intimacies of the marital relationship (cf. Gen 4:1, 17, 25). This conclusion with respect to the nature of Ham's sin is supported by the severity of the curse that it evokes. In addition it may be noted that when Noah awoke he "knew" what his son had done to him (9:24). It seems very unlikely that Noah would have had any remembrance of a mere look from his son while he was in a state of drunkenness.⁶

The strongest argument against viewing the sin of Ham as a homosexual act may be found in the description of the action of Ham's two brothers.

⁵ G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 137, allows for the possibility that the narrator of Genesis may have suppressed "something even more repulsive than mere looking." He refers to the phrase of v. 24: Noah knew "what his youngest son had done to him." Cassuto, *Commentary* 150-151, indicates that some have suggested that the narrative originally described a heinous sin committed by Ham, which has been eliminated.

⁶ Generally commentators who reject the idea that Ham committed a more serious sin than merely looking at his father's nakedness decline from explaining how it came about that Noah knew what his son had done to him when he awoke. Says Cassuto, *Commentary* 164: "We are not told how he knew, and it is superfluous to attempt to determine by guessing what the Bible does not state, since it was of no importance to its purpose." This treatment of the statement seems rather deficient. The NIV translation, "Noah . . . found out what his younger son had done," goes beyond the Scriptural expression, which only states: "Noah . . . knew what his son had done."

Their refusing to look on their father's nakedness while covering him suggests that the sin of Ham should be understood as exactly the opposite action, or "staring" at their father's nakedness.⁷ Another suggestion could be offered, however, that might explain more convincingly the extremity of their modesty. Why would two grown men act in deference to the extreme by walking backward in a darkened tent to cover the nakedness of their father? Undoubtedly on some occasions during the years they had lived with their father they would have seen him in the nude. Why then did they act with such extreme modesty?

Their action might best be explained by concluding that their brother actually had defiled their father by a sexual action. The father still was lying exposed after being humiliated by his own son. For this reason they felt compelled to exercise even greater restraints of modesty than might be expected under normal circumstances. Because of the great shame associated with the action of their brother, Shem and Japheth walk backward into their father's tent in order to cover his shame. Due to the recentness of the defiling action of their brother they restrain themselves from even glancing in the direction of their father.

In summary, the sin of Ham could be either one of sexual abuse or of mockery of his father. The more likely interpretation is that Ham committed a sexual sin, probably of a graver nature than merely "looking" on the nakedness of his father.⁸

II. WHY WAS HAM'S SON RATHER THAN HAM HIMSELF CURSED?

The words spoken by Noah on this occasion contain the first recorded curse uttered by a human being and involve far-reaching consequences. First it is stated that Canaan shall be a "servant of servants," a Hebraism for the lowest of slaves (Gen 9:25). The fact that Canaan is to be a servant to his brothers is repeated three times in three successive verses (vv. 25–27). Still further, it is expressly stated that Canaan will be a servant to both his brothers, first generally (v. 25) and then specifically (vv. 26–27).⁹ But why is it that Ham's son was cursed rather than Ham himself, and why this particular son?

Several proposals may be offered as possible answers to these questions. (1) If Ham's sin was one of revolt against parental authority, some explanation could be provided for the fact that the son of Ham rather than Ham

⁷ Says Cassuto, *Commentary* 151: "If the covering was an adequate remedy, it follows that the misdemeanour was confined to seeing." Cf. Wenham, *Genesis* 200. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 61, states that the term relates to exposure "and does not necessarily imply sexual offenses."

⁸ It is possible to combine all the suggested sins that Ham committed. According to one commentator "Ham is pictured as dishonouring his father presumably by impurely looking at his father's nakedness, by doing we know not what, and then by broadcasting the indecency around" (D. Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11: The Dawn of Creation* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990] 169).

⁹ Hebrew עַבְדֵי could be either singular or plural: a slave "to him" or "to them" (cf. Cassuto, *Commentary* 167). In either case, enslavement both to Shem and to Japheth is indicated.

himself was cursed. Ham would experience a judgment corresponding to his own sin. He would have to endure the same kind of rebelliousness against himself that he had expressed against his father. (2) The curse on Canaan could have been spoken because of a sin that Canaan himself had committed. Critics suggest a possible emendation of the text that would substitute references to Canaan rather than to Ham as the violator of his father.¹⁰ But this convenient resolution of the problem fails for lack of textual support. (3) It could be suggested that Canaan the son was cursed for a sin that he himself was yet to commit. It has been proposed that the curse of Canaan had been anticipated by his father in the choice of his name. "Canaan" possibly could be derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to stoop" or "to submit."¹¹ This designation could be understood as an anticipation of the curse he would undergo.

Scripture says the sins of the father will be visited on their children (Exod 20:5). Ham's son would have been cursed both as a way of judgment on the father and as an anticipation of the fact that the sin of the father would be reflected in the life of his son.¹² A statement in the next chapter of Genesis offers strong confirmation of this understanding. In the famed table of nations it is stated explicitly that the descendants of Canaan inhabited "Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim" (Gen 10:19). This reference to the cities of the Jordan plain that were destroyed because of their "sodomy" would appear to be intentional. The perverse sin of the father was reflected in his descendants who came through the line of Canaan. This perspective also would comply with the fact that in Genesis 15 Abraham is told that his seed must wander outside the land of promise for four hundred years because the iniquity of the Amorites (a portion of the Canaanites) was not yet full (15:13, 16). The full realization of the curse on Canaan, therefore, would await the fullness of the iniquity of the Canaanites themselves. According to one commentator

the sexual perversions of the Canaanites, often associated with their religious drunken orgies, were held up to the people of God as behaviours to avoid. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan," says Leviticus 18:3—and then follows a list of sexual malpractices which are not consistent with the life of the people of Yahweh.¹³

¹⁰ Cf. von Rad, *Genesis* 135. Wenham, *Genesis* 197, notes that from Wellhausen to von Rad numerous commentators have proposed that the text originally read: "Canaan saw his father's nakedness." But in addition to the fact that no textual evidence supports this rather neat solution to the problem, Noah is consistently said to be the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth, never Shem, Canaan and Japheth.

¹¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 156.

¹² Says Atkinson, *Message* 170: "The sins of one (Ham) can set the course for succeeding generations (Canaan)." In a similar vein Cassuto, *Commentary* 155, says, "The Canaanites were to suffer the curse and the bondage not because of the sins of Ham, but because they themselves acted like Ham, because of their own transgressions, which resembled those attributed to Ham in this allegory."

¹³ Atkinson, *Message* 169–170.

This view would seem to have the most to commend it. After all, it is in a prophetic context that these words were uttered with reference to all three of the sons of Noah. It is the line of Shem that is being blessed, and it is the descendants of Japheth who will dwell in the tents of Shem. In a similar way, it is the descendants of Ham's son rather than Ham himself or even Ham's son Canaan who ultimately are to experience the curse.

In considering this curse on Ham's son Canaan, it should be noted that grace as well as judgment plays a prominent role in the text. For not all of Ham's sons are cursed. The very fact that only one of the sons is cursed manifests the richness of God's grace to a fallen, sinful race. Though all men deserve God's wrath and curse, he graciously has determined that a great number from every nation, tribe and people will be spared.

III. IS THIS PASSAGE TO BE INTERPRETED IN A POLITICO-ETHNIC CONTEXT OR IN A REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL CONTEXT?

This larger hermeneutical question has a great bearing on understanding the significance of the passage. For long periods of history some interpreters have assumed that the black man as a descendant of Ham has been cursed by God. One missionary to a country in northern Africa reported that in his experience the nationals described themselves as cursed by God according to this passage of Scripture. They concluded that other nations had predominance over them as a consequence of a fate they could not escape. The usage of this passage to justify the enslavement of the black in American history is well known.¹⁴

Quite obviously, the hermeneutical perspective taken with respect to this passage is crucial. Are the words of Noah to be interpreted in a politico-ethnic context or in a redemptive-historical context? That is, do the words of Noah anticipate from a secularistic perspective the ways in which certain peoples and nationalities will relate to one another across the centuries? Or, rather, do these prophetic words outline the parameters for participation in the redemptive program that God has designed for delivering people from the curse of sin?¹⁵

¹⁴ For an informative overview of the application of Gen 9:25–27 to the enslavement of the black in America see L. R. Bradley, "The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro," *CTM* 42/2 (February 1971) 100–110.

¹⁵ An interesting summary of the implications of the passage may be found in J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 186: "Three points may be regarded as settled: that Shem is that family to which the Hebrews reckoned themselves; that Canaan stands for the pre-Israelitish inhabitants of Palestine; and that the servitude of Canaan to Shem at least *includes* the subjugation of the Canaanites by Israel in the early days of the monarchy." Though insisting that nothing more can be derived for certain from the passage, Skinner has acknowledged that the passage contains even in these items a remarkable, succinct representation of Israelite history. If it should be accepted that this utterance anticipates this history by several hundred years, it is indeed remarkable and necessarily divine in origin. But apparently not considering this alternative, Skinner rejects all fuller explanations of the implications of the passage and in good agnostic fashion concludes: "Unless the names Shem and Japheth

As we consider these alternatives, it would appear that the passage cannot be interpreted purely or principally in a politico-ethnic sense—particularly as it relates to the new-covenant era. For the substance of the curse itself indicates that the passage must be interpreted from a redemptive-historical perspective. It is not merely a curse of political enslavement that is involved. Instead it is the curse of being separated from the redemptive activity of God that is implied in the passage. The Lord of the covenant will be the God of some of the descendants of Noah, bringing blessing to their lives. At the same time, others of the descendants of Noah will be cursed by this same God.¹⁶

Furthermore, too many crossings of the politico-ethnic line occur in subsequent Biblical material to make it feasible to interpret this passage principally on the basis of nationality and race. In tracing the broad sweep of the lines of Shem, Ham and Japheth, some interesting conclusions emerge. First of all, it should be noted that not all Shemites were included among the blessed people of God in the OT. In the next two chapters (Genesis 10–11) certain subdivisions of the line of Shem as they relate to God's purpose of redemption must be noted. It is not all Shemites, but the family of Eber and then the family of Terah and finally the sons of Abraham among the family of Terah among the family of Eber among the Shemites that receive the specific blessing of God's covenant to redeem a people to himself. Still further, not even all the physical descendants of Abraham receive the blessing of God's redemption. God expresses redemptive love toward Jacob but passes over his twin brother Esau (Gen 25:22–23).

From the opposite perspective, the Abrahamic covenant makes it quite plain from the beginning that any non-Shemite could become a full-fledged Israelite by affirming the faith of Abraham and submitting to the rite of circumcision. As one Jewish commentator on the book of Genesis has noted: "Every stranger who submits to [circumcision] receives Abraham as his father and becomes an Israelite."¹⁷ And the same commentator further indicates: "Indeed, differences of race have never been an obstacle to joining Israel which did not know the concept of purity of blood. . . . Circumcision turned a man of foreign origin into an Israelite (Ex. 12:48)."¹⁸

As the new-covenant counterpart to this line that begins with Shem is considered, it becomes clear that all believers in Christ are regarded as the seed of Abraham and therefore heirs to the redemptive promises that go all

should be actually discovered in some historic connexion, the happiest conjectures can never effect a solution of the problem" (ibid. 187).

¹⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis* 137, explains the passage in a redemptive-historical context, although he denies that it has messianic significance (ibid. 138). Yet he views the matter as having been presented after the fact of the Canaanites' showing their depravity and Israel's being revealed as the favored of God. He speaks of the "prophetic sayings" of Noah about his sons but proceeds to correct the text according to his own inclinations by substituting "Canaan" for "Ham" and assuming that "Shem" actually is a reference to "Israel"—although acknowledging that this designation is "indeed singular in the Old Testament."

¹⁷ B. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (New York: KTAV, 1974) 115.

¹⁸ Ibid. 233.

the way back to God's blessing on the line of Shem. As Paul says so specifically, "If you belong to Christ, then you [plural, referring to Jews and Gentiles alike] are Abraham's seed [singular], and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). Not Shemites as such, not Israelites as such, but those Jews and Gentiles who belong to Christ as a consequence of their faith in him are blessed in the line of Shem. Clearly the line of blessing is not defined primarily as being related to a political or ethnic community but as a people from all nations who have been identified with the Redeemer by faith.

Next the line of Japheth may be considered. The beginnings of this line are developed in Gen 10:2-5. Who are the Japhethites? Generally they may be regarded as a portion of humanity identified today as the non-Semitic, non-Jewish, Gentile world. But the descendants of Japheth could not represent the whole of the Gentile world, since some Shemites who are not a part of the Abrahamic line are regarded as Gentiles. Furthermore the descendants of Ham also must be included among the Gentile world, since "Gentile" essentially refers to all peoples on the earth apart from those who come from Abraham and his line.

The prophecy says that God will "make wide" Japheth, and that Japheth will "dwell in the tents" of Shem (9:27). In pronouncing this blessing of his being "made wide" (תָּוַר), Noah plays on the name of Japheth (יָפֶֿתֿ). The reference to the Japhethites' dwelling in the tents of Shem would seem at first to imply a peaceable sharing of possessions. But elsewhere in Scripture it is stated that in Saul's day the Israelites conquered the Hagrites so that they "dwelt in their tents" throughout all the land of Gilead (1 Chr 5:10). This notation indicates that by conquering the Hagrites Israel came to possess all their blessings. So in a similar way the prophecy of Noah suggests that in the processes of history Japhethites would claim for themselves the blessing of the covenant Lord by entering into the tents of Shem.¹⁹ By conquering, they would become heirs of the blessing.

Repeated efforts have been made to discover the fulfillment of this prophecy in the subsequent history of Israel. It has been proposed that the Philistines, coming from Crete, possessed the territory belonging to Israel, thereby fulfilling the prediction that the descendants of Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem.²⁰ The spoiler to this hypothesis is found in the fact that the Philistines are classified as Hamitic (Gen 10:14). Going beyond the belief possibilities of negatively critical scholarship, it may be affirmed that in the redemptive sphere the covenant Lord eventually claims a people for himself from all the races descending from Noah's sons. This broadly sweeping prophecy that embraces the development of nations anticipates the day in which non-Jews from the sprawling Gentile world became sharers in the blessings brought through Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 2:11-13; 3:6). It is this inclusion of the enlarged Japheth that is predicted by Noah's words. Far from limiting the blessings of God to one race, the Shemites, this prophecy of

¹⁹ Atkinson, *Message* 170, cautiously raises this possibility in the form of a question: "Is there a hint here that . . . one day even 'outsiders' will be welcomed among the people of God?"

²⁰ Cf. von Rad, *Genesis* 134.

the old covenant anticipates the wide sweep of God's redemptive work that characterizes the age of the new covenant. As Jesus Christ has said, the day had to come when the kingdom of God would suffer violence, and the violent would take it by force.²¹ In this way the descendants of Japheth enter the blessing of the tent of Shem as they conquer.

It must be recognized, however, that not all Japhethites enter into this favored relationship to the God of Shem. Ultimately it has become clear that by faith alone a portion of the Gentile world enters into the blessing pronounced over Shem.

The complexity of the picture indicates that this division within humanity among the sons of Noah, although following to some degree an ethnic pattern in its old-covenant context, cannot be pressed consistently along ethnic lines. Particularly in terms of a new-covenant realization of this prophetic pronouncement of the old covenant, its ethnic or political dimension cannot be forced. Instead these words outline broad, sweeping principles that relate to the purposes of God toward humanity in the history of redemption. But these various relationships cannot be defined narrowly along concrete politico-ethnic lines.

Consider finally the line of Ham. So often it is assumed that Ham was the line cursed by God. It is possible that included among the descendants of Ham are Egyptians and Ethiopians, inhabitants of northern Africa (see Gen 10:6–20).

But Genesis 9 states quite clearly that Ham was not the person cursed. Instead it was Canaan as one particular son of Ham that received the curse. Obviously the anticipation of the future development of the character of the line of Canaan could not be known by any human means. Only the Spirit of God could have directed Noah in this prophetic pronouncement.²²

So far as the line of Canaan the cursed son of Ham may be traced, his politico-ethnic line leads to the inhabitants of Palestine. The table of nations as recorded in the next chapter of Genesis indicates this fact quite specifically: "Canaan was the father of Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites. . . . Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha" (10:15–19). The connection of persons and places in this listing with the land of Canaan is quite evident. The land of Canaan derives its name from the fact that it was populated by the descendants of Canaan. The destruction of the Canaanites under Joshua should be understood as a major fulfillment of this prophecy. But quite obviously it was not a black race or an African community that was involved in this curse.

Once more it may be noted that the curse of one of the sons of Ham rather than Ham himself demonstrates the grace of God in sparing the other sons

²¹ Cf. Matt 11:12: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force."

²² Cf. J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 1.306.

of Ham. At the same time it should be evident that the curse on Canaan does not exclude each and every Canaanite from experiencing the blessings of redemption that ultimately came to pass through the line of Shem that led to Abraham. The firstfruits of redemption from among the Canaanites is seen in the person of Rahab, a Canaanite harlot, who confessed the God of Israel. Along with her entire family she was included among the covenant people of God and ultimately possessed the privilege of being involved in the direct line of descendance that led to the Messiah (Josh 2:8–13; 6:25; cf. Matt 1:5). This introduction of a Canaanite mother into the line leading to the Messiah means that King David and all his descendants, as well as Jesus Christ himself, must be regarded as Canaanite in descent. From the cursed line of Canaan comes the promised Savior. In no other way could the grace of God be demonstrated more dramatically than in this reaching out to the entirety of sinful humanity. In order to extend this universal blessing to all portions of the human family, the Savior himself became the cursed one, the “servant of servants” among men. As the apostle Paul indicates, Jesus Christ humbled himself and took for himself the very essence of a servant (Phil 2:7), experiencing the full debt of the original curse spoken over Canaan.

On the other side of this curse of Canaan is the blessing of Shem. The text actually says, “Blessed be the [covenant] LORD, the God of Shem,” rather than “Blessed be Shem” (Gen 9:26). It is the covenant Lord of Shem rather than Shem over whom the blessing is declared.²³ The Lord of the covenant is being honored for his grace in sustaining the line of Shem despite the permeation of the race with depravity as seen in the action of Ham. Yet as a reflex of the blessing pronounced over the Lord is the blessing enjoyed by Shem.²⁴ If the gracious covenant Lord is the God of Shem, then Shem indeed must be greatly blessed. All the powers of this God are working in behalf of Shem and his descendants.²⁵

But as has been indicated, these blessings arising from a relation to the Lord of the covenant are not the exclusive property of Shemites. They extend also to descendants from among the lines of Japheth and even from the line of Canaan.

This inclusion of Canaanite descendants of Ham in the blessings of Shem clearly demonstrates that the curse of Canaan, whatever it might be, did not exclude all Canaanites from sharing in God’s redemptive grace. In other

²³ Compare the blessing pronounced by Melchizedek over the God of Abraham (Gen 14:20) and the blessing pronounced by Moses over God, the one “that enlarges Gad,” rather than the person of Gad (Deut 33:20).

²⁴ In noting that the blessing is pronounced over the Lord rather than over Shem, one commentator notes well: “It is not because Shem adds anything to God. If God is blessed, it must be through what God has done in Shem and its implication for the world” (H. G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976] 119).

²⁵ As has been indicated, the covenant name of God is used only with respect to the prophetic word spoken over Shem. It may well be that an intentional allusion to this special name of God is included in Shem’s name, which means “name.” Immediately after the genealogy of Shem as found in Gen 11:10–32, the narrative of the redemptive line begins with an allusion to the same name: “The [covenant] LORD said to Abram” (12:1). Cf. Kidner, *Genesis* 104.

words, some Canaanites also enter into the tents of Shem and receive the redemptive blessing found in Jesus Christ. The fulfillments of the new covenant emphasize that the blessing of redemption comes to a great multitude that no man can number from every tribe and language and kindred and people. Clearly it cannot be said that all Canaanites are excluded from the blessing of Shem.

These observations indicate that interpreting the curse of Canaan along purely politico-ethnic lines involves a complete misreading and misapplication of the Biblical text.²⁶ It hardly is doing justice to the message of this passage to suggest that the main purpose and thrust is to say that "as generation follows generation, human experience can only be healthy where it is acknowledged that a relationship of respect of the new generation to the older is basic to human community."²⁷

As in the case of all OT revelation, this prophecy partakes of the limitations of the shadowy form in which it occurs. Although the broad lines of the prophecy anticipate subsequent history, it cannot be applied in a rigid, wooden manner. Particularly as the transition is made from the old covenant to the new-covenant era, the same politico-ethnic significances cannot be maintained. For now it is the Japhethites and the Hamites (including the Canaanites) who possess the richest blessings as they were spoken over the line of Shem.²⁸ At the same time people from among the Shemites, along with people from among the Hamites (including the Canaanites) and the Japhethites, now are being grafted back into the true branch of God by faith (Rom 11:5, 23).

So this prophecy provides a remarkable broadlined sketch of the history of the nations in relation to God's purposes of redemption. The distinction must be made between the shadowy old-covenant perspective and the reality of the new-covenant fulfillment. From the perspective of the new covenant the gospel that originated with the descendants of Shem now is being proclaimed to all the nations, including Canaanites. All who respond in faith are incorporated into this blessed condition of having the God of Shem to be

²⁶ Says Kidner, *Genesis* 104: "Since it confines the curse to this one branch within the Hamites, those who reckon the Hamitic peoples in general to be doomed to inferiority have therefore misread the Old Testament as well as the New. It is likely, too, that the subjugation of the Canaanites to Israel fulfilled the oracle sufficiently (cf. Jos. 9:23; 1 Ki. 9:21)."

²⁷ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984) 494.

²⁸ Somewhat understandably a denial of the fulfillment of these prophetic words in a messianic context may be found in a modern Jewish analysis of this passage. According to B. Jacob, the entering of Japheth into the tents of Shem "most not be understood as a Messianic hope that Japheth should convert to Shem's God and faith" (Jacob, *Genesis* 69). Yet on the next page it is explained that by this prophecy Shem is pictured as the link between Noah and Abraham that keeps alive the faith in the Lord. This is "the most important idea of the story" (ibid. 70). If the greatest significance to be found in Abraham is the production of the Messiah, then the linkage of Shem to Abraham by this prophecy must have messianic significance as a principal factor. If Noah's father can place expectations of deliverance from the curse of the ground in his son on the basis of the promise concerning the "seed of the woman" (Gen 5:29; cf. 3:15), then Noah himself certainly could place messianic expectations in his son on the basis of the same earlier promise.

their God. But all those nations, peoples and individuals who manifest the same unrepentant spirit demonstrated during the four hundred years of God's patience toward the Canaanite inhabitants of Palestine shall receive the same kind of curse that fell on the inhabitants of the land in the days of Joshua. Total subjugation to divine judgment is inevitable for those who do not find their hope in the covenant Lord, the God of Shem.