

Blessings (*brk*) and Curses (*ʿrr*): Reading Canaan's Curses in Gen 9:18-27 in light of African Values

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Introduction

Genesis 9:18-27, puzzlingly deals with the theology of curses and blessings.¹ It does this within the context of the primeval story, Book of Genesis, and of the Old Testament as a whole. Generations of past scholars since antiquity have debated this text. They want to know why Ham's seeing of the nakedness of his drunk father, Noah (vv. 18-24), would lead to cursing Canaan, his grandchild, instead of the perpetrator, Ham (vv. 25-27)? They want to know the nature of Ham's transgression. And why Noah makes reference to the "youngest son's" (v. 24), offense, when Ham seems to be the second son (Gen 7:13; 9:18)? These scholars also are curious as to why Shem and Japheth were blessed? And why was Noah not even punished when he started it all with his drunkenness?²

¹ A Few works that have recently discussed blessings and curses in the Bible especially in the narrative of the Book of Genesis include Clause Westermann, *Blessing In the Bible and the Life of the Church*. Translated by Keith Crim, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 15-101; Jeff S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse; Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014) and Matt Chaplain, "A Biblical theology of Blessing in Genesis", in *Themelios* 42:1 (2017), 63-73.

² For samples of these scholarly debates, and reviews of rabbinic and some patristic exegesis of the text, see Albert I. Baumgarten, "Myth and Midrash: Genesis 9:20-29", in Jacob Nuesner et al. (eds.), *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, 4 vols. (Leiden; Brill, 1975) 3:55-71, and Terrence E. Frethaeim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections", in Leander E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 84-86. Also in *her Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 51 Susan Niditch calls the text "intriguing and difficult" while Marc Vervenne in his "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor? A Critical Re-Examination of Genesis 9:20-27", *JSOT* 68 (1995), 55 characterizes it as "an eccentric anecdote of which the reception and interpretation are often equally fantastic".

While addressing their curiosities, a number of interpretative options including voyeurism, castration, and slavery justification, paternal and maternal incest have been deployed variously to the dissatisfaction of this present work, which focuses on family relationship and the church in Africa and argues that it is un-African to “uncover our parent’s skirts” (*gālah ‘ervah*), or “reveal their nakedness” (*rā’ah ‘ervah*). These phrases, used here, are not restricted to euphemism of sexual abuse, but are extended idioms of disrespect, ridicule, exposure, abuse, and dishonour to African parents and elders. To reveal the nakedness of an African elder, especially our parents, generally speaking, is against traditional African-family values, such as filial piety, parenthood, orderliness, reverence to the sacred, modesty, and respect to seniors and elders. Choosing this path opposes God’s blessings, fullness of life, joy, divine favour and the goodness expressed in biblical literature (Gen 1:28; Rev 22:14-15), especially in the structure and narrative of the book Genesis. Disrespecting African parents attracts misfortunes, and a type of cursing depicted in Gen 9:18-27.

While arguing for the aforementioned African values, this work exegetically embarks on a deeper theological and contextual analysis of the implication of the story of Canaan’s curse (*‘ārar*) for the church in Africa. It speaks for the church that frowns at family dysfunctions, as well as a church constantly in need of God’s blessings, the fullness of life, peace, joy, good fortunes and divine favours (*bārûkôt*).

Meaning and Nature of Divine Blessings and Curses

To further consider the text, structure and analysis of blessings and curses in Noah’s family episode (Gen. 9: 18-27), it is imperative to broadly recapture the meaning and nature of blessings and curses. What does it mean to bless, to be a blessing, or to pronounce a blessing? Why is a blessing frequently given as a command? What does it mean to receive divine blessing? What does it mean to be a blessed one?

Responding indirectly to these questions, Diane Bergant in her Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C’s reflection on “Blessings and Curses”, writes:

What comes to mind when you think of blessing? Perhaps some degree of health! Your musings might include something as weighty as deliverance from harm or as commonplace as victory in a high school basketball game. When circumstances seem to go the way we want, it is not uncommon for us to consider them a blessing. And what about curses? We don't have to turn to witches' spell in fairy tales to find them. Cursing language is quite common in everyday speech. Even children cry out: "Drop dead!" "Damn it!" or "Go to hell!"... People in traditional societies, like those that produced the Bible, believed that certain speech itself had extraordinary power. They were convinced that when one pronounced a blessing or curse, the words themselves began the process of bringing about the objective. Therefore, they did not throw out words of blessings or curses randomly, as we might today. They further realized that if human words could accomplish such feats, one could only imagine what God's words might do.³

Similarly, Anderson suggests that, "blessings and curses are activities of pronouncement, or "performative" utterances. They are wishes but much more than wishes. They are also prayers but are more than prayers".⁴ A blessing is "a potent way to invoke, distribute, or celebrate the well-being that comes from divine favour".⁵ In the Old Testament, blessings primarily invoked fertility [deliverance, salvation], authority and dominion, wholeness, peace, and rest".⁶

Often these blessings might proceed from God to humans, from humans to God. But it is not very common in the OT to see someone blessing an inanimate object except in 1 Sam 9:13 where Samuel blesses the sacrifice before it was consumed by the people.

³ Dianne Bergant, "Blessings and Curses", in *America*, February 9, 2004

⁴ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 26.

⁵ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 26

⁶ See Johannes Pedersen, *Israel Its Life and Culture*. 2 vols. (London; Oxford University Press, 1926), 1:204-12, where four characteristics of blessing: power to multiply, establishing a home or a house; fertility of animals, crops, family; and strength of life are cited. This subject "blessing in the OT", is also extensively addressed in Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church*, 15-64

Blessing is God's enhancement of a life of fullness.⁷ For instance, in the Psalms, God is often presented as holy by means of a blessing (Pss 26:12; 34:1; 63:4; 66:26; 96:2; 100:4; 103:1; 104:1, 35; 134:1; 135:19; 145:10, 21; Gen 9:26; 24:48; Deut 8:8; Josh 22:33). Blessing God ("Praising the Lord") also returns praise to him who in the first place generously exercised God's providential enhancement of life. An individual or groups, like in the case of Abraham and Israel, who had received blessings, could themselves be considered as a blessing to others (Gen 12:1-3; Num 24:9).⁸

Blessings can also be exchanged between people in so many ways in order to enhance a relationship.⁹ In Ruth 2:4 a blessing may serve as a short greeting, or a brief expression to acknowledge kindness done (Ruth 2:20; 3:10; 1 Sam 23:21; 25:33). Blessings are also effective utterances when invoked by subjects with proper authority. For example, when parents bless children (Gen 27:27-40; 49:1-27), they have authority similar to prophetic statements (Jub 20:10-30, 26:22-25, 31:13-20).¹⁰ Blessings are common in festive occasions (Pss 115:12-14; 134:1-3), and customary to invoke God's name (Gen 27:28; Ruth 3:10; Num 6:27; Deut 21:5).¹¹

Lexically, "the Hebrew root *brk* produces the verb "to bless", and the noun "blessing" as well as the verb, "to kneel" and the noun "knee"(Gen 24:11; Isa 45:23).¹² Anderson cautions that although the etymological connection to the idea of someone kneeling to receive a blessing is tempting, such a connection may not be sustainable in the literary context of the Old Testament.¹³ Christopher Wright Mitchell points out that these verbal and nominal forms of the root *brk* occur over 400 times in the

⁷ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 26.

⁸ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

⁹ For extensive treatment of various ways through which blessings could be exchanged between people, see, Bilhah Nitzan, *Qumran Prayer and Religious Poetry*, STDJ 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 119-22 as well as Keith N. Grüneberg, *Blessing, and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, BZAW 332 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 90-122.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

¹¹ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

¹² Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 29.

¹³ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curses*, 29.

Hebrew Bible. Genesis and Psalms alone accommodate nearly half of these occurrences, while Deuteronomy adds an additional 51 examples. It occurs 160 times in the Torah, 88 times in the Prophets, and 148 times in the Writings.¹⁴ Most of the verbal forms occur in the *piel* passive participle, as in the formula, *bārûk ʾātā* (“blessed are you”).

In the Hebrew Bible, the blessing formula is commonly deployed and distributed nearly evenly between God’s blessing humans, humans’ blessing other humans, and humans’ blessing God. The feminine plural noun often pairs up with its linguistic and theological counterpart, blessings and curses (*bārûkôt wě qālēlôt*).¹⁵ It is also worth noting that the language of blessing varies with additional terminologies and idioms. Mitchell cites 29 variations and synonyms that broaden the semantic field of the root *brk*.¹⁶ Discussing all of them here is beyond the scope of this work. Many sources agree that the closest synonym to *brk* is *šrēy* (Jer 17:7-8; Job 29:11; Pss 1:1-3; 33:12 etc.), which is typically translated “happy”. K. C. Hanson argues that *brk* (*barak*) is a word of power, while *šrēy* entails a value judgment that imputes honour. Though these two words are thematically related, they are linguistically and contextually distinct. For Hanson, *šrēy* should not be translated “blessed” or even “happy”, but instead, “how honoured is/are...”¹⁷ Mark Biddle defines blessings as prosperity, protection, and prominence.¹⁸ In other words “blessing is the bestowing of privilege, right, responsibility, or favour upon some portion of the creation, by God or by one whom he has blessed”.¹⁹ Put differently, “to be blessed is to be one of God’s own

¹⁴ Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “to Bless” in the Old Testament*, SBLDS 95 (Atlanta: SBL, 1987), 185.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 201.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 201.

¹⁷ K. C. Hanson, “How Honorable; How Shameful!”: A Cultural Analysis of Matthew’s Markarisms and Reproaches”, *Semeia* 68 (1966), 83-114; Chaplin, *A Biblical theology of Blessings*, 66. Samuel Horn in his “Partakers of the Divine Nature”, sermon delivered at Northland International University, 5 May 2009, pointed out that this association of blessing with happiness is insufficient, instead commending the association of “blessed” with the word “approved”.

¹⁸ Mark Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 413.

¹⁹ Champlin, “Biblical Theology of Blessing”, 66.

people with all the benefits that it bring. God's blessing is his relational presence in one's life".²⁰

Conversely, curses are expressions of misfortunes, calamity and evil.²¹ It signifies the divine shattering of relationship.²² Like blessings, curses are not mere wishes but are powerful and effective performances that have potency when uttered, but only in appropriate contexts by appropriate individuals.²³ A curse is an illocution meant to do something by its invocation. Even though curses occur less than blessings in the OT, the Bible expresses some of the same social relationships in cursing as in blessing, such as parents towards children (Gen 9:25-27; 49:7), priests toward people (Num 5:21-22), and other religious leaders towards the community of God's people (Deut 27-28). Curses can therefore refer to the divine bestowal of these misfortunes and calamities, as well as the use of insolent language against individuals or groups.²⁴ Anderson gives an example where it was expressly forbidden to curse one's parents or disrespect them (Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9).²⁵ This is one of the values highly cherished in African society. Anyone who cursed patriarchs Abram or Jacob would be separated from the blessing of God (12:3; 27:29). Also due to their cursed actions, Simeon and Levi lost some of the natural family privileges of older sons to their younger brother (Gen 49:7-12).

The OT also reveals a rather wide semantic range of terminology to express the concept of cursing. The most common ones are *`rr*, *`lh*, and *qll*. But half a dozen other terms may also be translated as "curse" or "oath," depending on context.²⁶ The last two roots *`lh*, and *qll* are beyond the scope of this work.²⁷ The first root *`rr*, is generally recognized as the

²⁰ Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, 1:182-90.

²¹ See Anne Marie Kitz, "Curses and Cursing in the Ancient Near East", in *Religion Compass* 1/6(2007), 615-27 for a helpful review on curses.

²² Champlin, "Biblical Theology of Blessings", 67.

²³ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

²⁴ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

²⁵ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 27.

²⁶ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 31.

²⁷ For detailed discussion of these two roots (*`lh*, and *qll*) of curse terminology see, Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 33-37.

strongest example of curse language in the OT.²⁸ In verb form, it occurs about 63 times in the Hebrew Bible, usually in the *Qal* stem (54 times), most frequently in Deuteronomy 27-28 (29 times). The derivate noun occurs about 5 times. This is far less than the roughly 400 times that the root *brk* is used in the OT.²⁹

Willy Schottroff draws our attention to the uniqueness of *ʿārûr* formula, formed with the *Qal* passive participle of *ʿrr* in the OT.³⁰ This type of curse formula, usually begins with participle followed by the subject, which can be personal pronoun, a specific individual or group, or an unidentified subject.³¹ For example in Gen 3:17, we read: “Cursed is the ground because of you”. In Gen 9:25, our specific texts hear, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will be to his brothers”.³²

Similar curse formulas have been spotted in many other places especially by Ziony Zevit in Khirbet Bei Lei’s 1961 excavation; “cursed be.... who/he will sing in time to come...”³³ Generally, *ʿārûr* curse formula is not just a separation or ban from community. It is an act of public shaming and shunning. It is often used in person with a position of authority.³⁴ For example in the primeval history where *ʿrr* (curse”) appears about five times Gen 3:14; 17; 4:11; 5:29, and in our texts of study, Gen 9:18-27. It is a story of blessings and curses in Noah’s family.

²⁸ Johannes Pedersen, *Der Eid bei den Semiten: In seinem Verhältnis zu verwandten Erscheinungen sowie die Stellung des Eides im Islam*, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients 3 (Strassburg: Trübner, 1914), 68; Willy Schottroff, *Der altisraelitische Fluchspruch*, WMANT 30 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969), 61-70.

²⁹ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 31.

³⁰ Schottroff, *Der altisraelitische Fluchspruch*, 231; Josef Scharbert, “ʿrr”, in *TDOT* 1:405-18, 1974.

³¹ Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse*, 32.

³² See similar curse in 1 Samuel 14:24 “cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes”.

³³ Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Paralactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), 429-32. By the way, Khirbet Lei is a 6th century BCE burial complex with three chambers.

³⁴ Scharbert, *ʿrr*”, 409.

Curses and Blessings in Noah's family (Gen 9:18-27): Text and Analysis

The basic outlines of Noah's family story in Gen 9:18-27 is well known. After the flood, Noah, the first human of the new generation, goes out, plants a vineyard, practices winemaking, gets drunk, exposes himself, sleeps off and uncovers himself in the tent, as stated in the following text (vv. 18-20):

V. 18. *wayyîhyû bʾnê-noaḥ hayyotsʾ ʾîm min-hattēbhāh shēm wʾḥām wʾyāpheth wʾḥam hûʾ ʾāb hîkʾnāʾan/* The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan.

V. 19. *šʾlošāh ʾēlleh bʾnê-noaḥ ûmēʾ ēlleh nāphtsāh kōl-hāʾārets/these three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth were peopled.*

V.20. *wayyāḥel Noaḥ ʾîšhāʾ ādāmāh wayyîttaʾ kārem/*and Noah was the first tiller of the soil/soil man. He planted a vineyard.

As the story continues, Ham, Canaan's father disrespectfully violates, mocks, humiliates and exposes his father to his other brothers outside the tent. His brothers, Shem and Japheth, respectfully, and fearing the Lord, take a garment and enter the tent backwards. With eyes in the opposite direction, they cover their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from the sleep, he realized with displeasure what his son, Ham had done to him. He then blesses Shem and Japheth, but curses Ham's youngest son, as narrated in the following text:

V.21. *wayyēštte min-hayyayîn wayyîškkār wayyîtggal bʾtōk ʾāḥāloh/*and he drank from of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent.

V.22. *wayyarʾ Hām ʾābhî Kʾnaʾan ʾēth ʾervath ʾābhîw wayyaggēd lišnê-ʾehāyiv baḥûts/*and Ham, the father of Canaan saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.

V.23. wayyîqqaḥ shēm wāyepheth eth-hassimlāh wayyāssîmû `al-šekem šenēhem wayyēlkû `āhorannîth wayekassû `ēth `ervath `ābhîhemûphⁿēhem lo' rā'û./then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

V. 24. wayyîqets Noah miyyēdh' wayyēda' `ēth `āšer-`āsāh-lōbⁿō haqqāton/when Noah awoke from sleep he knew what the younger son has done to him

V. 25. wayy'omer `arûr Kⁿā'an `ebhed `ābhādîm yîhyeh l^a'eḥāv/and he said cursed be Canaan' a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers

V. 26. wayy'omer bārûk `ādonay `ēlohē Shēm wîhî Kⁿa'an `ebhed lāmō/he also said blessed be the Lord my God be Shem, and let Canaan be his slave

V. 27. yaphet `ēlohîm l^ayepeth w^ayîškon b^a'āhālê-shēm yîhî Kⁿa'an `ebhed lāmō/god enlarged Japhet, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem and let Canaan be his slave.

This text, according to Fretheim is made up of additional genres, including narratives and genealogies. It is a multi- literary type of reflection on complex of layers of traditions' history, which no redactor has smoothed over.³⁵ Commentators, as noted earlier, worry and scramble for answers as to why Noah would refer to what his “youngest son” (v.24) has done, when Ham seems to be the second son (v.18). Could it be that the redactor may have had access to two literary traditions regarding the identity of Noah's children: (1) Shem, Japheth, and Canaan; (2) Shem, Ham and Japheth? This combination of source materials could have resulted in the insertion of “Ham, the father of” (vv. 18, 22) as well as in the overlying of material about Canaan, based on Israel's later experience in the land God had promised them.³⁶

³⁵ Fretheim, “Book of Genesis”, 84.

³⁶ Fretheim, “Book of Genesis”, 84.

No doubt, this complex structure of story is literarily encircled by brief genealogical or generational notices (*tôl^adôth*).³⁷ Broadly speaking, Gen 9:18 begins a new division which continues to Gen 11:10. It narrates the repopulation of the earth through the sons of Noah. Verses 18-19 resume earlier genealogies and references to the sons of Noah (6:9-9:29) and announce the spreading out of their families in Genesis 10-11. Genesis 9:20-27 explains the threefold division of the race for its spiritual dimension. Verses 28-29 give chronological notes about Noah's life and death, completing the genealogy begun in Genesis 5.

References to grape bearing vines and Canaan as a mature man indicate that the story took place many years after the flood. Fretheim also observes that Gen 9:18-27 presents the first Genesis story in which God does not appear directly.³⁸ Verse 25, the *'ārûr* curse in particular, according to Rolf Rendtorff, is the only humanly imposed curse in the entire Torah.³⁹

Exegetes in the past have analysed this storyline differently for thousands of years. In the first place, some have blamed Noah for drinking excessively, which led to his laying uncovered in the tent (v. 21). Noah allows the products of the earth (alcohol) to take control of him instead of the other way round, going by the Lord's command in Gen 1:28.⁴⁰ Besides the breaking of the Lord's command, it is suggested that the story was originally grafted into the biblical literature in order to justify slavery and the subjugation of the Canaanites to the Israelites. Others concentrate their comments on Ham's transgression as voyeurism, castration, paternal or maternal incest while downplaying this essay's

³⁷ See Champlin, "Biblical Theology of Blessing in Genesis", 64-65, where a useful study has been shared concerning the narrative structure of Genesis which can be broken "down along the lines of the 'generations' (*tôl^adôth*), which yields a striking pattern with regard to blessing and cursing". In addition, Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 18, presents this pattern of (*tôl^adôth*), generations in Genesis emphasizing "movement, a plan, something in progress and motion".

³⁸ Fretheim, "Book of Genesis", 84.

³⁹ Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, David E. Orton (trans.), Tools for Biblical study Series 5 (Leiden: Deo, 2005), 18.

⁴⁰ Barnable Assohot and Samuel Ngewa, "Genesis", in Adeyemo Tokunboh (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi; Kenya: Worldalive Publishers, 2006), 24.

emphasis on the need for God's blessings, by honouring and respecting our parents, while avoiding the flippancy of Ham and excess alcoholism seen in Noah.

Voyeuristic Arguments and Comments

Many scholars are of the opinion that Ham's offense in Gen 9:22 was ordinary voyeurism. They argue that he did nothing more serious than just looking at his father's nakedness.⁴¹ Assessing voyeurisms' strengths and weaknesses, Bergsma and Hann suggest that its strength is conservatism since it refuses to accept anything in the text that is not explicit. In terms of weaknesses, voyeurism fails to make clear neither the seriousness of Ham's transgression nor the reason for *the ʾārûr* (curse) of Canaan.⁴² Voyeurism also requires that the interpreter embraces and assumes existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent that is unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature.⁴³ It is on this same note that Donald J. Wold made the remarks that "Scholars who accept the literal view (of Gen 9:22) ... must defend a custom about which we know nothing".⁴⁴

Castration Arguments

A good and comprehensive review of rabbinic and patristic exegesis of Ham's offense as castration is found in Albert I. Baumgartner's work, "Myth and Midrash: Genesis 9:20-29".⁴⁵ Granted that details of

⁴¹ Some of them are: H. Hirsch Cohon, *The drunkenness of Noah*, Judaic studies 4 (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 14-16; Allen P. Ross "The Curse of Canaan", *BSac* 130 (1980), 223-40; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 322-23; Gordon P. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 198-201; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 87; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, I. Abraham (trans), 2 Vols (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 2:149-54; E. P. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, AB 1, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 418-20; Claus Westerman, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, John J. Scullion (trans.), (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 484-88.

⁴² John Sietze Bergsma and Scott Walker Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)", *JBL* 124/1 (2005), 25-40

⁴³ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness", 27.

⁴⁴ Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1998), 67.

⁴⁵ Baumgarten, "Myth and Midrash", 3:55-77.

Baumgartner's arguments are beyond the scope of this work, his conclusions are worth looking at. Baumgartner concludes that the rabbis developed the theory of castration as an explanation for features of the text, thus, they are not transmitting an ancient tradition.⁴⁶ Bergsma and Hahn seem to align with Baumgartner. They also believe that castration arguments were advanced in order to address "the inadequacies of the voyeuristic interpretation".⁴⁷

Such classic rabbinic arguments are found in b. Sanh. 7a, which we cannot cite in full here, due to space. In this text, the rabbis were struggling to explain the gravity of Ham's sin and the cursing of Canaan.⁴⁸ Rab seems to conclude that Ham castrated his father, Noah, as found in ancient Near Eastern mythology of a son castrating his father in order to usurp his father's authority.⁴⁹ Even though this is not biblically attested, Rab's view suggests a possible motivation for Ham's crime and rationale for the cursing of Canaan, namely, "Noah cursed Ham's fourth son since Ham deprived Noah of a fourth son".⁵⁰

Paternal and Maternal Incest Arguments

Many other scholars are of the view that Ham sexually abused his father; hence, Canaan his son was cursed. Even though Bergsman and Hahn are not proponents of paternal incest arguments, their extensive study on this subject is worth our review. Their list of paternal incest' proponents include, Robert Gagnon, Anthony Philips, Devorah Steinmetz, Martti Nissinen, Donald J. Wold, Seth Daniel Kunin, and O. Palmer Robertson.⁵¹ These proponents believe that the way Noah realizes in Gen

⁴⁶ Baumgarten, "Myth and Midrash", 55-71 contra Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Books of Genesis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 121-122 who argue for castration theory.

⁴⁷ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness", 27.

⁴⁸ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness", 28.

⁴⁹ See Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myth*, 122.

⁵⁰ See detailed study of this in Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness", 28.

⁵¹ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 63-71; Anthony Philips, "Uncovering the Father's skit", in his *Essays on Biblical Law*, JSOTSup 344 (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 245-50; Devora Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History", JBL 113/2 (1994), 193-207; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 53; Wold, *Out of*

9:24 “what his youngest son had done to him” (‘āšer-’āsāh-lōb²nō haqqāton) suggests some action much more than passive viewing of his father’s nakedness. Noah must have been the victim of such action.⁵²

Paternal incest proponents also believe that the phrase “to see the nakedness of his father” (rā’ah’ervath ‘ābhîv) in verse 22 is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁵³ To support their arguments they appeal to Lev 18:6, (“None of you shall approached anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness” [gālah ‘ervah]), as well as to Lev 20:17 (“if a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness [rā’ah ‘ervah], and she sees his nakedness [rā’ah ‘ervah], it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people; he has uncovered his sister’s nakedness [gālah ‘ervah]), he shall be subject to punishment”.

Bergsma and Hahn also argue that all the preceding arguments for paternal incest are better suited to argue for maternal incest.⁵⁴ This is because in all the relevant texts, (gālah ‘ervah/rā’ah ‘ervah), “reveal their nakedness” actually refers to the mother’s nakedness and heterosexual activity.⁵⁵ Even though Ham’s behaviour may be explained

Order, 65-76; Seth Daniel Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structural Analysis of Hebrew Mythology*, JSOTPsup 185 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 173-74; O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Critical Questions Concerning the ‘Curse of Ham’ (Gen 9:20-27)”, *JETS* 41 (1998), 179. See also Robert W. E. Forrest, “Paradise Lost Again: Violence and Obedience in the Flood Narrative”, *JSOT* 62 (1994) 15-16; Ellen van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1-11 and Other Creation Stories* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1997), 146; Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 51, who lean towards paternal incest theory.

⁵² Bergsma and Hahn, “Noah’s Nakedness”, 29; Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 65; Wold, *Out of Order*, 73 and Robertson, “Curse of Ham”, 179.

⁵³ Kunin, *Logic*, 174; Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 66; Hans-Jürgen Zobel, “gālā”, *TDOT* 2:479; Steinmetz, “Vineyard”, 198, “clearly the ‘seeing of nakedness’ implies a sexual violation, as it does throughout the biblical text”; Robertson, “Curse of Ham”, 179; and Vervenne, “What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?”, 49, “key word here, hwr [.....does have an erotic and sexual connotation”.

⁵⁴ See Bergsma and Hahn, “Noah’s Nakedness”, 34-39 for details of their arguments which is beyond the scope of this work.

⁵⁵ Bergsman and Hahn, “Noah’s Nakedness”, 34; Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 69 “the prohibition against sexual intercourse with ‘your father, which is nakedness of your mother; she is your mother’ refers to intercourse with one’s mother, not one’s father”. Besides its use in Leviticus 18 and 20, the phrase occurs only in Ezek 22:10, where

as an attempt to usurp his father's authority, there is no precedent in biblical or ancient Near Eastern texts for paternal rape as a means of usurping a father's position.⁵⁶ To the contrary, there are several instances of sleeping with one's father's wives as a means of taking over their authority (cf. Reuben's relationship with Bilhah in Gen 35:22; 49:3-4; David's acquisition of Saul's Concubines in 2 Sam 12:8; Adonijah's attempt to take David's wife Abishag in 2 Kings 2:13-25).⁵⁷

There are also instances in ancient Near Eastern literature, especially in the myth of Baal-Hadad castrating El and taking his wife Asherah as his own and consolidating royal power.⁵⁸ There is a similar Sumerian creation account in which the wind god Enlil—the son of the sky god An and the earth goddess Ki—separates his parents from each other and absconds with his mother, eventually replacing An as chief of the Sumerian pantheon.⁵⁹ Another obvious Greek parallel for the usurpation of the father's authority by taking over his wife is the myth of Oedipus.⁶⁰ In other words, maternal incest's theory fits well into this larger framework of ancient Near Eastern context. I believe that even if Ham's story were read as persuasively suggested by Bergsma and Hahn, the aforementioned African values are not directly addressed, which is the focus of the final section of this work.

Ezekiel is quoting a list of sins from the Holiness Code. Therefore, outside Genesis 9, the phrase "nakedness of the father" in the Bible always refers to the nakedness of the father's wife.

⁵⁶ Even though Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 47, 52, 66-67 cites the Egyptian myth of Horus and Seth (in which Seth violates Horus) and a certain Mesopotamian omen text as evidence, but both explicitly concern intercourse between peers or brothers, not between father and son.

⁵⁷ See Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages", *JBL* 99(1980), 507-508 "that through the carnal knowledge of suzerain's harem a man could lay claim to suzerainty himself was a custom apparently well-founded in Israel (2 Sam 3:6-10; 16:20-23; 1 Kings 2:13-25)".

⁵⁸ Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 112-118.

⁵⁹ See Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 4; Kramer, *Mythology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 39-40.

⁶⁰ Bergsma and Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness", 38; Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kingship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis*, *Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 11-34.

Genesis 9:18-27 in the Light of African Values

In what precedes, the various hermeneutical options for the episodes of Canaan's curse and blessings of Shem and Japheth, Noah's children, have been presented with dissatisfaction to the broader family values--relationship approach, adapted in this present work. As we saw, the voyeuristic proponents understood Ham's exposure of his father's nakedness as mere looking and perhaps downplaying the seriousness of his behaviour and as well as the curses incurred by Canaan. The proponents of Castration theory, among other things, lack convincing textual support while the paternal-maternal incest proponents have not addressed African values, including communal life together. It is also worth noting that in Gen 9:25, Noah uncovered himself unlike other texts (Lev 18-20) where people uncover others' skirts.

Within the context of family and communal living, respect to one's parents and filial piety comes in multifaceted forms. They are core values in African society that Noah's family problems could be related to, especially the biblical idioms, "to see nakedness" [*rā'ah 'ervah*], and "to uncover nakedness" [*gālah 'ervah*] of one's parent.

One area this could be related to is the issue of alcoholism, Noah's problem. Excessive alcoholism in the lives of African parents is neither a virtue nor a sign of blessings. Family alcoholism and drug addiction affects children morally, socially, and psychologically. Noah, who planted a vineyard and drank of its wine in excess, and neglecting his privacy, may not be the best of parental examples in the Church in Africa (vv. 18-21). He allows the "earth" to dominate him rather than the other way round as ordained by God in Gen 1:28. This raises a note of caution to African leaders and parents who are placed in the position of authority (like Noah) to make good use of our God's given nature, human lives, family, children, land, including our palm wines, fruits and trees and other natural mineral resources. Abusing what we have, even in form of vandalism of common property has nothing to do with peace, unity, joy, shalom, general well-being, fertility, growth, divine favour, good health and good fortunes, long life, fullness of life, that characterize the theme of blessings (*bārûkôt*) in biblical literature. Rather it breeds the

ʼārûr/qālêlôt (curses) experiences, opposes and disrupts the fullness of life, peace, joy and divine favour promised us.

Another area is how Ham handles his father's privacy. It is true that Ham caught a glimpse of his father's nakedness, if we go literary by verse 22. Rather than acting discretely Ham chose to expose his father to his brothers who were standing outside. By so doing Ham shamed, mocked and humiliated his father. It is quite un-African to ridicule one's parents to outsiders (Shem and Japheth) as Ham did. Flippancy is not a virtue and may not always lead to blessings. Shem and Japheth who did not share in their brother's act of disrespect to their parents, are worth emulating. In verse 23 we are told, "Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father (*wayekassû ʼēth ʼervath ʼābhîhem*), while their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness (v. 23)".

Furthermore, the notion that Shem and Japheth "covered the nakedness of their father" (*wayekassû ʼēth ʼervath ʼābhîhem*) reminds me of an American expression of "watching somebody's back", meaning, to be our "brothers' or sisters' keeper". By doing so, Shem and Japheth covered their father's back and nakedness as commanded by the Lord, "honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land the Lord your god is giving you" (Exod 20:12).

In African context "covering our parents' nakedness", or not exposing them, may not be just single dimensional. It includes honouring them in many ways.⁶¹ Commenting on Genesis 9, Assohoto and Ngewa in *Africa Bible Commentary* drive home this point in the following observation:

Nakedness (they observe) may be the result of moral weakness or from material poverty or from physical weakness of illness or old age. Whatever form it takes, we are to act to maintain our parents' dignity. We must not abandon them to misery in our villages nor isolate them in beautiful villas of anguish. Nor must we simply see their needs and talk

⁶¹ Note that this does not also mean covering up the ills of the society or crimes committed by elders especially in the context of the recent sexual abuse of clergy in the church and of others in the society at large.

about them. We must take action to meet their needs (Matt 15:1-15). Often, we will find that they long more for our love and our presence than for the things we can offer them.⁶²

How many times do we not read and hear stories of African children sponsoring armed robbers to rob, kidnap, trick and expose their parents to bankruptcy, lies and other forms of “nakedness”? As rightly observed by Assohoto and Ngewa, “there are people who are like Ham even in the spiritual realm and within the life of the church. Such people see moral, economic and social problems, talk a lot about them, and may even preach on the subject, but they take no practical and visible steps of love to remedy the situation”.⁶³ We not only need to combine action and word (James 2:14-18; 1 John 3:18), but to rethink the lessons of Noah’s family story (Gen 9:18-27).

Granted that Canaan curse was that “he will be a slave of slaves to his brothers”, while the blessings of Japheth was an extended territory up to the tent of Shem, should slavery and marginalization of the poor be divinely justified using this text (vv. 25-27)? I do not think so, after all even though Ham was cursed, the genealogy in Gen 10:6-20 shows that Ham’s other sons were actually blessed including Cush, Mizraim and Put. God does not despise anyone based on colour, gender nor race.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, we have analysed Gen 9:18-27 and highlighted the place of curses (*`rr*) and blessings (*brk*) in Noah’s family within the context of the Book of Genesis and the Hebrew Bible. We have done so in light of the aforementioned African values. We have also reviewed (though not exhaustively) various hermeneutical options in explaining the rationale for the curse of Canaan and blessing of Shem and Japheth. The voyeuristic option, which explains Ham’s transgression as mere literal and ordinary viewing or uncovering of his father’s nakedness, is not sufficient to readers in the church in Africa. Neither does the paternal nor sexually charged maternal incest options, that Canaan is a child of illicit union between Ham and his mother, Noah’s wife. The dividends of

⁶²Assokoto and Ngewa, “Genesis”, 25.

⁶³Assohoto and Ngewa, “Genesis”, 25.

addressing Genesis 9:18-27 to the needs of the church in Africa is manifold. It explains: (1) the importance of respecting and honouring ones' parents (Exod 20:12), (2) promotes good family values, (3) discourages the flippancy of Ham, (4) encourages the prudence of Shem and Japheth, (5) reminds us Africans of sources of divine blessings and curses, (6) renews in us the theology of creation, un- creation and recreation; sin-exile-grace; (7) explains the rationale for the cursing of Canaan and blessing of Shem and Japheth, (8) avoids erotic languages of paternal and maternal incest options; (9) explains the need for appreciation of God's nature, with good relationships between parents and children also emphasized for the Church in Africa, that is constantly in need of God's blessings.