

The Curse of Ham: Biblical Justification for Racial Inequality?

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***Abstract:** The story of the drunkenness of Noah that caused him to remove his clothing and thus provided the opportunity for his son, Ham, to “see” him (Genesis 9:20–27), has never received an interpretation that has been unanimously adopted by interpreters over the centuries. By examining the concept of “nakedness” as it functions in biblical legislation, this article argues that the most plausible understanding of the passage is that Ham committed incest with the wife of his father, Noah. Concomitantly, it becomes clear that the literalist idea of “race” used to undergird either slavery or any comparable form of white supremacy cannot be derived exegetically from the passage.*

Keywords: Curse of Ham, Noah, Drunkenness, Incest, Nakedness

Can a man rake fire into his bosom and his clothing not be burned?
Can a man walk on live coals and his feet not be scorched?
It is the same for the one who has sex with the wife of
another fellow;
no one who touches her will go unpunished. (Proverbs 6:27–29)

Genesis 9:20–27 spins an enigmatic tale about Noah involving four issues that are still debated in the twenty-first century: family abuse, alcoholism/drunkenness, homosexuality, and/or incest. Taken literally, as with many early post-biblical translations and traditions, the story describes an act of voyeurism: viewing the genitalia of a drunken father by a son (who then reports the act to his two brothers), followed by a harsh curse upon the child of that son by the father.¹

The Literal Interpretation

Even in modern times, the literal interpretation has not been without advocates. More than a century ago, John Skinner argued as follows: “There is

¹ See, for example, the LXX, Philo, and Josephus.

no reason to think ... that Canaan was guilty of any worse sin than the *Schadenfreude* implied in the words. Heb. Morality called for the utmost delicacy in such matters like that evinced by Shem and Japheth.”² Claus Westermann argued simply that nakedness was “disgraceful” in ancient societies, and concluded that the episode meant nothing more than that Ham should have covered his father instead of waiting on the two other brothers to do so.³ Recently and most doggedly, Victor P. Hamilton has argued for “limiting Ham’s transgression simply to observing the exposure of the genitalia and failing to cover his naked father.”⁴

In support of the literal view, one can turn to the text itself, where Noah, “uncovered himself in the middle of his tent” (9:21b)—a phrase that offers no hint that any other person was present until Ham entered. Furthermore, the description of the action taken by the other two sons, Shem and Yaphet, seems to fit this interpretation as well—walking backward so as not to see their naked father as they approached to cover him (9:23). But this final phrase of verse twenty-three could easily be translated to provide an explanation of why they had been unaware of the incident until Ham bragged about it to them. It does no violence to the text as it stands to presume that they walked backward and covered their father’s nakedness after the fact because when it had happened, they had been facing an opposite direction, and “they had not seen (*lo’ ra’u*) the nakedness of their father.”

Objections to the Literal Interpretation

To the contrary, however, while accepting a literal reading might appear to offer a simple pathway through the passage, there are several linguistic elements in the present text that arise to block that pathway. Initially, it must be acknowledged that the version retained in Genesis is almost certainly not the complete story. Addressing this point, esteemed professor of Bible, Nahum Sarna, offered the most reasonable assessment for this supposition: “Because the original incidents, in all their detail, were well known to the biblical audience and for reasons of delicate sensibility, only the

² John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1910), 183.

³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. D. E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 9.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 323.

language of Canaan” (שפת כנען).²² Linguistically, “Canaanite” was quintessentially “Semitic,” and efforts to force the descendants of Canaan into a racial mold different from that of the early biblical Hebrews are misguided and wrong. When the question of “Why?” is broached, the apparent answer is that the story of Noah and Ham was not exegeted. To the contrary, those whose economic fortunes depended upon the institution of slavery immediately initiated a search for a biblical way to defend the indefensible.

Generations of fundamentalists have cited this passage as a biblical justification for slavery, political leaders of the Confederacy believed it to provide justification for going to war in order to protect slavery,²³ and more than one major Protestant faction became a separate denomination founded on this very idea.²⁴ But the use of Genesis to support slavery, approve of a Jim Crow society, suppress voting rights, or support a related purpose that involves isolating and persecuting any group other than one’s own is the most shameful misuse of Scripture imaginable. However the sin of Ham is defined—and it is unlikely at this late stage that any single interpretation will achieve unanimity among scholars—the story has nothing to do with “race,” a marker that to modern science, has lost all meaning and validity. In her answer to the question, “What is race, exactly?” Elizabeth Kolbert is precisely on point: “Science tells us there is no genetic or scientific basis for it. Instead it’s largely a made-up label, used to define and separate us.”²⁵

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²² See for example Isaiah 19:18. In fact, early Phoenician, Ugaritic, Moabite, and Edomite are also, along with Hebrew, members of the same Canaanite branch of the Northwest Semitic linguistic family.

²³ See the discussion in Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 70–87.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 82–85. See also his citation of the books by George D. Armstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (New York: Scribner, 1857) and Robert Louis Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia (and through Her, of the South) in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (New York: E. J. Hale, 1867).

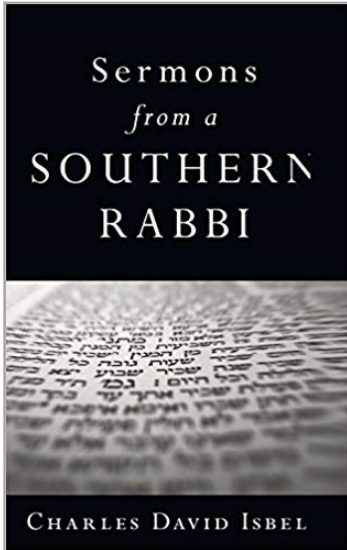
²⁵ Elizabeth Kolbert, “Skin Deep,” *National Geographic*, 2018, 28–41.

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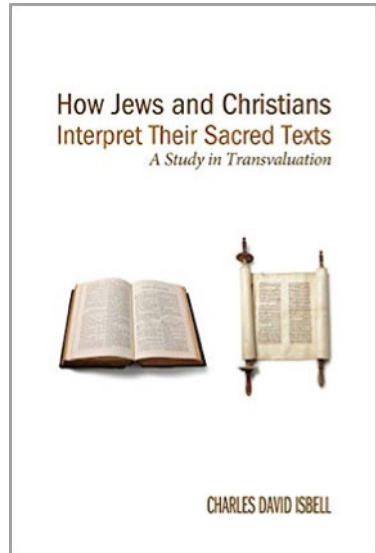
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