

Rethinking Ham's Offense: A Balance of Responsibility in Noah's Curse Narrative (Gen 9:18–27)

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Abstract

There are two central factors commonly fronted to explain the cursing act of Noah: Ham seeing his father's nakedness *וַיֵּרָא ... עֶרְוַת אָבִיו* (Gen 9:22); and, by extension, the presumption that it explains why Canaanites are guilty in the context of their relationship with Israel as depicted in the biblical narratives. In particular, the heightening of Ham's offense excludes Noah from taking responsibility for the emerging conflict. That is to say, the more Ham's offense is depicted as grave, the greater the justification for Noah having pronounced the curse. This paper seeks to re-examine the nature and gravity of Ham's offense and raises the possibility that his offense may not be as morally grave to warrant Noah's curse. Instead, the action for which Ham should bear responsibility in the cursing incident is a taboo offense occasioned by his inadvertent stumbling on his father's nakedness, bearing in mind that the father's actions precipitated the offense. This begins to point out that Noah had a share of the blame for the fragility of the conflict situation and hence shares responsibility for the devastating curse scenario. This study looks at this text from a literary narrative approach, considering the linguistic clues that point to the narrative plot and the narrator's point of view. Notably, the investigation does not presume that Canaanites are guilty based on this text as its starting point. Such a presumption, reading the text from an ethnic lens, perpetuates Canaan's guilt, thereby asserting justification for the curse by Noah. In contrast, this study takes a familial perspective in which the characters in the narrative are treated first and foremost as individuals in family contexts rather than representatives of ethnicities.

Keywords: Curse, familial, offense, taboo, ethnic, Noah, Ham, Genesis



Introduction

Genesis 9:18–27 has elicited a lot of scholarly discussions. Wenham insists that the thrust of the story in Genesis 9:18–27 focuses on blaming Ham. Nevertheless, he also admits that Noah is a parent who could have disgraced himself.¹ Noah is characterized mainly by his speech and actions in this pericope. How we read Noah's actions before the specific curse action informs how we characterize him in relation to the cursing act. The precipitating events leading to Noah's condition of nakedness in the tent already place some level of responsibility on Noah,² but on their own may not meet the threshold for faulting him for cursing his son. This is to say the act and the intent of Ham, the supposed offender, are significant in the ethical judgment of Noah's response.

Ham appears in three crucial scenes in the pericope. First, when he is introduced at greater length than his two brothers in association with Canaan — וְהָם הָיָא אֶבְרָם כְּנָעַן: (v. 18). Second, he is mentioned when a similar association with Canaan is reiterated, in the context of Ham's response to his father's nakedness (v. 22). Third, he appears on stage when he is presumed to be Noah's son (בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן) referred to in verse 24—that is, as the son who in some way offended his father, thereby triggering the curse upon Canaan.³ Noah's malediction and other pronouncements on his sons (vv. 25–27) have been considered so important for the inquiry into the nature and magnitude of the offense against him. Notably, Noah's utterance raises the question of why Canaan was cursed and the implications of the curse.⁴ In the passage in view, Noah is not only uttering his only words in the Hebrew Bible,⁵ but the narrator also gives Noah's speech a relatively large space (vv. 25–27).

¹ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, ed. John D. W. Watts, vol. 1, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 199.

² Looked at individually, or collectively, the three actions by Noah in verses 20–21 where he plants a vineyard, drinks wine, and becomes drunk, show the events that lead to a deterioration, with the climax that Noah finds himself naked (v. 21). Since Noah is the only subject of the events, the narrator already indicates fallibility on the part of Noah.

³ Ham is such a focal point in this narrative to the extent that some scholars have characterized the story as “the Curse of Ham”: the *Curse of Noah* emphasizes on the person who utters the curse; the *Curse of Ham* emphasizes the offender in view in the passage; and the *Curse of Canaan* emphasizes the direct object of Noah's curse and advances the theological import in which Canaanites are viewed as Israel's adversaries.

⁴ There are indications that the penalty for the offense in this text may have been too severe. For further discussions see: Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 1A, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 419.

⁵ It is fascinating that like in the book of Daniel, where Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego speak only once in the book (in chap. 3), the narrator allows Noah to speak only once in Gen 5–9. This clearly lends special emphasis to their words and his characterization.



From a familial perspective, the nature and gravity of Ham's offense is a basis for evaluating Noah's utterances in verses 25–27.⁶ A familial perspective provides a meaningful opportunity to explore the nature and gravity of Ham's offense to the extent of characterizing Noah for all his actions, including the maledictions. Although the narrator is not explicit that Ham has sinned, I will suggest that Ham has nevertheless erred, and the nature of the error is subject to re-examination. I will argue that Ham's offense was a taboo offense, of seeing his father's physical nakedness, that it was inadvertent, and yet it still constitutes a social offense. Such taboo offenses were culturally defined abominations.⁷ A taboo offense, whether advertent or otherwise, was an incident that could have grave consequences irrespective of whether the parties involved were directly responsible or the matter was accidental. In this paper, I analyze the textual and contextual clues that point to the nature and gravity of Ham's offense. It entails a review of some of the existing propositions regarding Ham's offence – for example, the telling of his brothers in jest and infringing on his father's space in the tent constitute part of his offense.

Literary Analysis

Verse 22 depicts the beginning of a family crisis in this story:

וַיֵּרָא חָם אֲבִי כְנָעַן אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וַיַּגֵּד לִשְׁנֵי-אֶחָיו בְּחוּץ

“And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside” (Gen 9:22).⁸

Three parties in the family of Noah are enjoined in this crisis—Ham, his father, and his two brothers (vv. 21–23). However, the two significant characters at this point are Noah and Ham. Ham is faulted for some action not explicitly highlighted or specified by either the narrator or

⁶ Part of the reason there has been a gloss in the characterization of Noah with regard to the cursing act was because of the attention on Ham's offense (Clyde Francisco, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton Allen, Rev. (Nashville: Broadman, 1973), 147, notes that “all blames seem to fall on Ham”).

⁷ William W. Hallo, “Biblical Abominations and Sumerian Taboos,” *University of Pennsylvania Press*, JQR, 76, no. 1 (1985): 33, defines abomination in Sumerian and Akkadian perspectives as “infractions against ethical or behavioral norms,” extended in Akkadian texts of the first millennium to “normally legitimate activities which happen to be conducted on an un- acceptable day.” Hallo argues that some abominations, say in Leviticus 18:23, are not against “the Lord”. But it needs to be put in perspective that it implies so. Although Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 489, points to lack of “respect for the elders” as Ham's offense that culminated into the malediction, his description of the nature of the offense, to a considerable extent, captures what an abomination or taboo would entail: “It is rather a question of a line of demarcation in human relations that was taken very seriously in [the] ancient world: the continuity of the life of a group of people depends on the stream of tradition being passed on undisturbed from one generation to another.”

⁸ NAS version.



Noah, which the narrator assumes would be well-understood by the readers.⁹ Different scholars advance or emphasize particular or a range of issues that would constitute Ham's offense.¹⁰ In order to establish the nature and gravity of Ham's offense, it is important to sift through some of the possible offenses Ham may have committed and isolate the more probable ones.

From the narrative, there are four potential ways of exploring Ham's offense: analyzing the fact of Ham telling his brothers about their father's situation; exploring the presentation of Ham's brothers' responses as a foil against Ham; the determination if Ham intentionally infringed his father's private space; and exploring the meaning of Ham's 'sight' on his father's nakedness. The goal is to explore why any of Ham's actions may have met the response in verses 24–27. For example, if the offense was the act of seeing his father's nudity, then why does it draw such a harsh response from Noah?

Telling the Two Brothers (v. 22): A Case of Neglect and Jest?

Ham reemerges in verse 22¹¹ and is characterized by the action of seeing the nakedness (עָרֹתָ) of his father inside the tent and telling his two brothers who were outside (וַיַּגִּדְלִישְׁנֵי־אָחָיו בַּחוּץ) (vv.21–22).¹² Wenham, agreeing with Westermann, classifies Ham as having dishonored his father by telling his brothers— characterizing it as a “lack of total discretion” and “adding to

⁹ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1997), 40, is more explicit, stating that “No one has ever figured out exactly what Ham did to Noah.”

¹⁰ Nicholas Oyugi Odhiambo, “Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse: A Critique of Current Views” (Ann Arbor, MI, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 30, points out five essential views on the nature of the offense: “The first view is that the offense was of a sexual nature. Advocates of this view can be further categorized into those who consider the sexual offense to be incest, those who regard Ham's act to have been of a homosexual nature, and those who consider the offense to have been voyeurism. The other four views are sight, disclosure, unfilial irreverence, and castration, respectively.”

¹¹ Ham is initially simply counted among the three sons of Noah in verses 18–19, albeit with an additional detail associating him with Canaan (v. 18c). Then from verses 20–21, the stage is dominated by Noah's actions. When Ham reemerges (v. 22) it is after Noah sets the stage for him.

¹² According to Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative*, 48, Ham's offense is multiple; Ham sees his father's nakedness, avoids covering him, and goes to tell his brothers in a way to bring them into the trail of disrespect for his father. Similarly, Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1:199–200, has argued that the two most likely offenses committed by Ham are leaving his father uncovered and then publicizing his father's nakedness to his brothers. According to Wenham, it is a combination of two offenses where Ham shows “a total lack of filial piety,” for failing to cover the father's nakedness and instead goes on “prattling about the situation to his brothers.” This position has been argued by Odhiambo, “Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse,” 1, which also constitutes his thesis and conclusions. Wenham describes the publicizing as one with “with total lack of discretion” classifying it as terrible gossip. John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1993), 123, has a set of things that characterize Ham negatively which includes the reporting as well as the failure to cover him. He holds that “Ham's disgraceful conduct presumably lay in the fact that he reported the fact [of Noah's nakedness] rather than doing something constructive about it.” This position is shared by many scholars. For example, Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis = Be-Reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 66; D. A. Carson et al., eds., *NBC: 4th ed* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 67; ; and John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *BNC: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 41.



his father's disgrace."¹³ While seeing a father's nakedness and failing to cover him might constitute part of Ham's offense, it is far-fetched to suggest that Ham unnecessarily publicized the nakedness of his father to his brothers. First, there is no indication that "telling" his brothers implied jest on Ham's part, as claimed by some critics. Neither is there any indication that the act of telling his brothers triggered the ensuing conflict between Ham and his father in verses 24-25, thus resulting in the curse. Besides, there is no textual or contextual support that Ham's divulgence of his father's state should be understood in a negative light.¹⁴ Odhiambo's conclusion that the offense in view "lies with Ham disclosing to his brothers the fact of their father's nakedness rather than covering him upon discovering his state"¹⁵ has little merit. On the contrary, that point of view fails to appreciate that by telling his brothers, Ham triggered the positive action of covering the father by the brothers, which was a noble thing to do to rescue the situation of father lying naked (v. 23). If covering their father was considered positive, even triggering a blessing pronouncement, it minimizes the possibility that Ham's reporting to the brothers was necessarily a negative response.

As will be argued in the subsequent sub-section, if the action in verse 23 acts as a foil against Ham, then it would be more likely that Ham's offense would constitute either his failure to cover his father's nakedness or the act of seeing his father's nakedness. From a narrative perspective, it is much more plausible that the function of the statement וַיֹּאמֶר לְשְׁנֵי אָחָיו בְּחוּץ, '...and told his two brothers who were outside,' is linking verse 22 to verse 23. In this case, the response of the two brothers of Ham is prompted by Ham's own action of reporting their father's situation to them. I will return to verses 21–22 after first exploring the implications of Japheth and Shem's response in detail in verse 23.

Shem and Japheth's Response: What foil against Ham? (v. 23)

According to verses 21-22, Noah was drunk and lying naked when his son, Ham, stumbled on his state and then reported to his brothers. In their response, the two brothers, Shem and

¹³ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1:200. In the verses Wenham cites for his assertion Exodus 21:15, 17 calling for capital punishment for those who strike or curse their parents, while admitting that “the OT nowhere states how sons should handle situations where parents are disgracing themselves” (Wenham, 199). Furthermore, the reference to Ugaritic *Aqht* epic which states that a son should hold the father by the hand and carry him while drunk with wine (Wenham, 200), does not directly apply to the setting Noah finds himself in, except for the act of covering.

¹⁴ Nicholas Oyugi Odhiambo, “Ham’s Sin and Noah’s Curse: A Critique of Current Views.” Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007, 26–29, has ably summarized the claim of “unfilial reverence” with insinuations that Ham uncharacteristically mocked his father by reporting to his brothers, jeered at him from the time he saw him and when he reported, or laughingly disclosed his fate to his brothers.

¹⁵ Odhiambo, “Ham’s Sin and Noah’s Curse,” 152. He suggests that “Ham’s failure to cover his father’s nakedness was clearly a violation of the expectation to cover up involuntary nakedness.”



Japheth, show up on the scene inside the tent (v. 23). The response of Ham's brothers to their father's predicament is universally considered positive. The matter to determine in the response is what exactly constitutes a foil against Ham. This response to an apparent crisis may be considered a *foil* against Ham in two possible ways: unlike Ham, the two sons cover their father's nakedness; and unlike the act of Ham, the two brothers make every effort not to "see" their father's nakedness.

The *waw*-consecutive beginning the phrase, וַיִּקַּח שָׁם וַיִּנָּת אֶת־הַשְּׂמֶלֶה (v. 23) is sometimes translated as contrastive —“*but* Shem and Japheth...”¹⁶ If it is upheld that the conjunction should be translated as ‘but,’ it would directly potentially point to a foil against Ham. On this basis, commentators find justification to interpret this action by Shem and Japheth as an indictment against Ham for failing to cover his father's nakedness or for seeing his father's nakedness, or both. It would then seem obvious (grammatically) that the same clause holds both actions of covering as well as their effort not to see (in the process), וַיִּקַּח שָׁם וַיִּנָּת אֶת־הַשְּׂמֶלֶה...וַיִּסְתֹּר אֲבִיהֶם לֹא רָאוּ (v. 23). Hence it would not be an overstatement that the foil entails both Ham seeing his father's nakedness and failing to cover him.

On the matter of Shem and Japheth's restraint, the narrator does not only emphasize that they did not see their father's nakedness (וַיִּסְתֹּר אֲבִיהֶם לֹא רָאוּ) (v. 23b). He also slows down the pace of the narrative. He paints a picture of intentionality and effort by the two sons to ensure that their eyes do not stray in the wrong way, as happened to their brother, Ham. This attests further to the fundamental triggers of the ongoing crisis in the story; that is, Noah's nakedness and Ham's “seeing his nakedness.” Besides, the narrator's focus on the act of seeing a father's nakedness is further captured by the repetition of the word עֶרְוַת (nakedness), which is mentioned three times in verses 22–23. Gowan has pointed out that part of the respect entailed covering sexual parts, so it was a great dishonor to see someone's nakedness.¹⁷

As a noun in the OT, עֶרְוַת signals inappropriate sexual intercourse (Lev 18), and the seriousness is indicated by the consequences of violating the norm of sexual decency. Ezekiel 22:10 re-enforces the gravity of the sexual offense, and similar imagery is used in Ezekiel 23:29 to depict a strong nuance of shame – especially when it was a horror for captives to be

¹⁶ The NIV, NASV, and NKJV render the contrastive version.

¹⁷ Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11*, 1st ed., ITC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 108. Clifton J. Allen, ed., *BBC*, Rev. vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman, 1973), 148, has highlighted the “lack of understanding both of the Hebrew attitude toward nakedness...”



rendered naked.¹⁸ In Isaiah 20:4 ‘nakedness’ dramatically shows the gravity of shame associated with it being physical nudeness: *“For the king of Assyria will take away the Egyptians and Ethiopians as prisoners. He will make them walk naked and barefoot, both young and old, their buttocks bared, to the shame of Egypt”* (NLT). In Deuteronomy 23:15; 24:1, nakedness is associated with being unclean and indecent, which is also shameful. In 1 Samuel 20:30, Saul uses the imagery of ‘nakedness’ to chasten his son, Jonathan. In Isaiah 19:7, the term refers to a bare place (such as a desert). Earlier, in the book of Genesis itself (42:9, 12), the adjective is used to show the weakness and vulnerability of a situation.¹⁹ It emphasizes that being naked in the first place was socially detested, especially with potential exposure for others to see.

Therefore, if the narrative space and detailed account of the behavior of Ham’s brothers is meant to portray Ham negatively, it should be more on the grounds of having seen his father’s nakedness rather than not participating in the covering of the father’s nakedness. This observation does not invalidate the fact that covering the father’s nakedness is part of the positive responses of Ham’s brothers. However, it does not, by itself, necessarily characterize Ham negatively. Emphatically, the narrator is silent on why Ham is not part of the effort to cover his father’s nakedness. Wenham has noted the narrator’s strategy to reduce the pace of the narrative and point out the awkwardness of the task of Noah’s sons covering their father: “Backing into a tent trying to cover their sleeping father without looking at him must have been quite a tricky operation!”²⁰ This points to how tricky it would have been for Ham to attempt to cover his father when he first saw his nakedness without seeing his nakedness a second time. From the narrator’s point of view, Ham is already a victim of a situation that his two brothers make every effort to avoid. It is worth reiterating that the joint effort by Noah’s two sons to cover his nakedness demonstrates that Ham would have struggled not to see his father’s nakedness if he had attempted to cover him by himself. Perhaps it would equally be cumbersome or inconsequential for a third party (say Ham) to join Shem and Japheth in covering their father.

Therefore, if the actions depicted in verse 23 act as a foil against Ham, it is essential to underscore that it is a foil against the incident of seeing his father naked, and less about an

¹⁸ Francisco, *BBC*, 1:148.

¹⁹ Allen has pointed out that God gives Adam and Eve clothes in the Garden of Eden (see more explanation below), as well as the fact that “during the late Maccabean age the pious Jews were greatly disturbed by the appearance in Jerusalem of a Greek gymnasium where naked people were exercised” (Francisco, *BBC*, 1:148).

²⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1:200.



indictment of Ham for reporting his father's nakedness nor failure to cover the father. The arguments that Ham was wrong to tell his brothers about nakedness and not to cover his father's nakedness are uncertain and unconvincing.

The Significance of the Settings: Ham's Inadvertent Foray (vv. 21–22)

In verse 22, Ham is the focus and is shown to have seen his father's nakedness —the incident which marks the beginning of his negative characterization.²¹ The idiomatic readings suggesting that Ham's offense had to do with having sexual relations with his father or his father's wife are disputable based on the actions of Ham's brothers, who cover their father's nakedness. In fact, the narrative story gives very little room to dispute that the covering of their father's nakedness was literal (v. 23). Since this is the case, then the possibility of sexual connotation on the part of Ham where he lay with his father's wife has little bearing.²² Similarly, the context shows that Ham reported the incident to his brothers, and his brothers avoided seeing their father's nakedness, implying that Ham's offense could not have been rape. The very fact that it is Ham reporting the naked situation further minimizes this possibility.

If seeing the father's nakedness constitutes the matter at the center of Ham's offense in the story, then one needs to explore whether Ham intentionally saw his father's nakedness.²³ One of the arguments would be based on the fact that Ham's infringement takes place in Noah's tent. The narrator does not provide details of the conversation between Ham and his two brothers in verse 22. Instead, he shows the contrast in the *settings* of the conversation between Ham and his two brothers. He sees his father's nakedness in the midst (בְּתוֹךְ) of the tent (v. 21) and tells his brothers outside בְּחוּץ [the tent] (v. 22).²⁴ According to

²¹ From an ethnic and etiological perspective, one would begin to characterize Ham negatively when he is associated with Canaan the adversarial nation to Israel (v. 19).

²² Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 488, in refuting the suggestion of incest, points to this clarity of the narrative for a literal meaning. See also Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative*, 43, who points to Shem and Japheth's behavior as a response that disputes sexual connotation on Ham's action. See a similar argument in Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1:200. Some arguments in favor of Ham's sexual sin against Noah are motivated by the drive to find an equivalent grievous action that would match Noah's response to Ham. For example, Thomas Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, & Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 192, refers to Ham's action as a "terrible taboo" over his father's nakedness. Odhiambo, "Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse," 152, rightly dismisses the argument for sexual offence by stating that "The parallelism between the phrase, ... רָאָה in Gen 9:22 and Lev 17:20 or Lev 18:7, 8, 14, 16 is only apparent, if not altogether false."

²³ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 169, suggests in general that Ham dishonors his father by "impurely looking at his father's nakedness."

²⁴ Moše Aberbak, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis: A Critical Analysis Together with an English Translation of the Text (Based on Sperber's Ed.)* (NY: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 66, emphasizes the 'heinousness of Ham's shameful act' by translating that Ham went to tell his brothers "in the street" (v. 22). The textual emendation in



some critics, the locative phrase בְּתוֹךְ אָהֳלָה (v. 21) emphasizes Ham's offense, which implies that even if Ham is not intentional in 'seeing his father's nakedness,'²⁵ he intrudes into the father's personal space, and ends up seeing his nakedness.²⁶

The term בְּהוֹיֵץ in this form appears 17 times in the HB. In some instances, it refers to a location with reference to 'another setting' (Gen 24:31; Ex 21:17, Deut 24:11, 2 Kgs 10:22). In other instances, it simply serves to locate objects without reference to another setting (Ez 10:13; and Job 31:32; Prov 20:27). Yet in others, it defines the nature of the locations, with no reference to distances (Ps 31:11; Prov 1:20; 7:12; 22:13; Isa 42:2; Jer 6:11; Ezek 7:15; Hos 7:1). For example, Proverbs 7:12 defines the location of the adulterous woman, which is significant in that it defines her character rather than spatial aspects. Although Genesis 9:23 simply locates the two brothers outside, the nature of the location is not in view. Often, where the nature of the location is in view, the translation could be 'outside,' 'in the streets,' or 'in the public square.' Outside (בְּהוֹיֵץ) Noah's tent does not describe the nature of the location but could denote the aspect of physical distance. The closest parallel to the use of בְּהוֹיֵץ that denotes distance is in Songs of Solomon 8:1. Here, the inside of a house is distinct from the outside; it highlights the purposes of the action of the Shulamite woman. It would, therefore, not make sense to translate בְּהוֹיֵץ in Genesis 9:22 as the streets or public square. If the sense of distance had significance to the extent that it portrays social distance, then Ham should have avoided intruding into his father's tent. However, since the nature of the location and distance have no such significance, it could also be translated as 'outside' as a mere location with no reference to another. Thus, the translation, 'outside,' is preferred because it is neutral and does not carry the connotation of 'public square' nor any significance with regard to social

verse 22 may put weight on the polemic that Ham went away without giving his father attention, or that the other two sons of Noah were at safe distance from the offense. Either way attempts to characterize Ham negatively. This translation in rabbinic cycles serves to put emphasis on Ham's supposed shameful acts of failing to cover his father's nakedness and relaying the information to his brothers "in the street", "in the marketplace" (Bernard Grossfeld and Lawrence H. Schiffman, eds., *Targum Neofiti 1: An Exegetical Commentary to Genesis* (NY: Sepher-Hermon Press, 2000), 116. There are similar emphases in the Targum for Gen. 39:12, 13, 15, 18; and Ex. 21:19.

²⁵ Calvin Goodspeed and D.M. Welton, *An American Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Genesis*, 1st ed. (PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1909, 96, believe the foray was not intentional (maintaining that "the seeing was actually accidental and therefore an innocent act"). Odhiambo, "Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse," 85, also rightly observes that "Ham should not be judged as guilty at this level since he did not enter the tent to view his naked father; rather, he saw his father naked when he entered the tent." However, DBD, 2001, 907, "supposes sinfulness by its proposal that Ham looked at the nakedness of his father 'by direct volition.'"

²⁶ Odhiambo, "Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse," 83, points out that the narrator only places Noah inside the tent through aforementioned locative phrase, בְּתוֹךְ אָהֳלָה. He argues that the action of Ham's brothers attests to the significance of Ham's location when he saw his father naked- a sense of privacy that excludes Noah from blame.



distance. Since undue significance should not be placed on Ham's location, there is no reason to insinuate that Ham inappropriately broadcasts his father's nakedness to a wide audience.

If the phrase is nuanced as Noah "was in the very heart and midst"²⁷ of his tent or "in the very midst" of his tent,²⁸ then Sarna finds the basis for suggesting that the *setting*, more intensely, characterizes Ham negatively by portraying him as intruding into his father's private space.²⁹ However, the conclusion does not find credence if the social arrangement regarding the use of tents between parents and their children allowed Noah's sons to live with him in the tent.³⁰ Furthermore, the narrator shows no complexity in either Ham or his brothers entering the father's tent. In any case, the response of Ham's brothers to cover their father entailed getting into the tent, while the sons would have been hesitant to simply enter their father's private space if such a restriction existed.

Following a similar cue to argue for Ham's infringement, Odhiambo argues that the text makes emphatic reference not only to the tent by use of the prepositional prefix בְּ but by the fact that the tent belonged to Noah as reflected by the possessive pronominal suffix (אֶתְּלֶהָ).³¹ He argues that "the occurrence of the construction elsewhere with the term אֶתְּלֶהָ, confirms the nuance of privacy that is resident in the construction."³² He cites 2 Samuel 6:17, 1 Chronicles 16:1, and Joshua 7:21 and concludes that seeing nakedness was not the vice in view in the narrative.³³ However, Odhiambo's readings from the biblical references he cites are only essential statements of fact that do not necessarily lay emphasis on the location of the objects mentioned or imply complete privacy.³⁴ Moreover, the phrase וַיִּתְּגַל בְּתוֹךְ אֶתְּלֶהָ (v. 21b) does not provide any clue regarding the precise location of Noah. Most likely, for emphasis on the location where Ham sees his father's nakedness, the narrator would have included the prepositional phrase, בְּתוֹךְ אֶתְּלֶהָ in verse 22, where Ham is mentioned regarding

²⁷ Francis Brown et al., *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 1063c. This nuance though does not have textual argument.

²⁸ Odhiambo, "Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse" 84.

²⁹ Sarna 1989, 65.

³⁰ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 79.

³¹ Odhiambo, "Ham's Sin and Noah's Curse," 83–84. Odhiambo implies that Noah was not exposed.

³² Ibid., 84.

³³ Ibid., 84.

³⁴ For example, 2 Samuel 6:17 states that "They brought the ark of the LORD and put it in its place in the middle of the tent that David had pitched for it (NET)." In this context, the use of the phrase, בְּתוֹךְ הָאֵתֶלָּה, does not have any implications or emphasis on privacy, but rather on just the designated place for placing the ark. There would be no options for placing the ark elsewhere. Similarly, Joshua 7:21 conveys a sense of a hidden place, but the items were hidden not merely because they were in the midst of the tent (בְּתוֹךְ הָאֵתֶלָּה)- Achan hid 'in the ground' (בְּמִצְרֵי). It is noticeable that in verse 22, the idea of being hidden has less to do with the middle of the tent, but simply suggests a hiding in the tent (הָאֵתֶלָּה), perhaps with reference to how it was hidden in the tent or in the middle of tent.



his purported infraction. Therefore, the point is not where Ham finds Noah lying; it is the fact that Noah is lying naked, which has implications when Ham arrives in the tent. The spatial location of Ham's brothers is a mere statement of fact that may not implicate Ham as being in Noah's tent wrongly. Ham simply sees his naked father—inadvertently and less of an intentional foray into his father's private space. Ham's initial probable fault remains a case of stumbling on the father's nakedness, as will be argued further below.

Seeing a Father's Nakedness: A Taboo Offense (vv. 22–24)

As already observed in verse 22, the narrative plot points to a crisis. However, it is verse 23 that fully depicts the magnitude of the crisis and the necessity to intervene. It has been argued that the characterization of Ham begins in verse 22 for one plausible reason—seeing his father's nakedness. It has been argued in this paper that Ham's disclosure of his father's nakedness would not constitute the reason for Noah's reaction. The only action repeated by the narrator is seeing a father's nakedness. It is important to reiterate that in verse 23, when Ham's brothers respond to the father's disgraceful situation, as they cover him, they take the greatest caution to avoid seeing their father's nakedness, as had happened to Ham earlier in verse 22. The response of Ham's two brothers not only depicts Ham's offense as literally seeing the father's nakedness, but it also begins to point to the gravity of such an occurrence. It reinforces that Ham's offense is culturally sensitive and therefore depicts the apparent gravity of the familial crisis or conflict.³⁵

The context of the narrative suggests three possibilities for what seeing a father's nakedness (וַיַּרְא) would constitute: seeing the physical nudity of his father, having sexual relations with his father; or dishonoring his father by having sexual relations with the wife of his “sedated” father.³⁶ Based on the literal meaning of the phrase, וַיַּרְא הָם אֲבִי כְנָעַן אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו, ‘Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness,’ three aspects in the narrative point to the seriousness of Ham's offense: the use of relational epithets (vv. 22–24); the manner in which Japheth and Shem cover their father's nakedness (v. 23); and Noah's malediction against Ham (vv. 24–25). If Ham's offense was seeing his father's physical nudity and that it was a consequence precipitated by Noah's actions, then Ham's offense appears to be stumbling over his father's indecent posture in the tent. Thus, Noah's response points to Ham's offense being a taboo offense.

³⁵ Walvoord, Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary, eds., *BKC*, 41, point out that “to the ancients, ... even seeing ones father naked was a breach of family ethic. The sanctity of the family was destroyed and the strength of the father was made a mockery.”

³⁶ DBD, 1996, 788d–89.



The Significance of Relational Epithets (vv. 22–24)

The relational epithets (אָבִי, לִשְׁנֵי־אָחָיו, בְּנֵי) (vv. 22–24) reinforce the point of view of the narrator in the ensuing family crisis. These relational epithets seem to be pronounced in the interactions between Noah and his sons in verses 22–24 as the tension rises. They are used when describing the relationship between Ham and Noah (אָבִי), between Ham and his siblings (לִשְׁנֵי־אָחָיו), and in verse 24, where the narrator mentions what his (Noah's) young son had done to him (אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה־לּוֹ בְּנֵי הַקָּטָן).³⁷ On the surface, these genitives of relation point to the existing familial ties among the characters. However, in light of the emerging conflict, the random use of kinship relational terms between Ham and Noah to depict a cordial and positive familial relationship is unexpected. Certainly, the narrator accurately reports the family dynamics present within the story. It appears that in verse 22, the relational terms are rhetorical devices the narrator could be using to highlight further the irony of the events in the light of kinship relations. The irony is particularly vivid when Ham and Noah's relationship is in view. The tension between Noah and his son is within the familial setting, where the relationship between a son and a father has obligations and responsibilities. While this should create an expectation in the minds of the readers, the actions and tone of the story tell otherwise. It is the two sons of Noah who, in verse 23, represent the expectations in such familial relationships to redeem the dignity of a father. The relational epithets between Noah and the other sons only heighten the tension between Noah and his son, Ham. Therefore, the blend of relational epithets and the rising tension creates an uncomfortable irony that seems to emphasize Ham's offense.³⁸ The narrator is, therefore, insinuating that the offense of Ham was grave – a “serious sin,” as previously described by Wenham.³⁹ However, as Keim admits, “a taboo rather than a moral offense was originally involved.”⁴⁰ Even if the conflict is not yet

³⁷ Bruce Waltke, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), sec. 9.5.1i.

³⁸ There must be an emphatic function or a different nuance when the narrator shows Ham ‘seeing’ the nakedness of אָבִי ‘his father’ and not the nakedness of הָאָדָם ‘Noah.’ This father-son relationship is attested in the use of the relational terms [בְּנֵי] even in the circumstance of heightened conflict between Noah and Ham in verse 24.

³⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 35.

⁴⁰ Paul Arden Keim, “When Sanctions Fail: The Social Function of Curse in Ancient Israel” (Ann Arbor, MI, Harvard University, 1992), 125. These two aspects suppress Ham's point of view in most of the interpretations. Even when some authors affirm Ham's literal seeing of the father's nakedness as the offense in the story, they still understand the story from the perspective of Noah without due diligence to even Noah's precipitating actions. Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative*, 44–45, draws from Near East context, especially the Ugaritic text and Canaanite morality in asserting that Ham failed in his obligation to honor his father in the circumstances. Avishur's focus on the son's responsibility is evident in the example he gives about the feast of gods. In this feast El, gets drunk and is found rolling in his excrement and urine, and his sons carry him on their back and are commended. Clearly, the parallel has limitations. The circumstances are related but uniquely different in an



apparent in the text, the relational epithets in verse 22 prepare the reader for an eventuality that is unfortunate in the family context, and where Ham is pointed out as the offender (v. 24). Furthermore, the relational epithet, 'אֲבִיהֶם their father' (v. 23), continues to reflect family dynamics in the story—once more indicating the social-cultural texture of a son seeing a father's nakedness, and perhaps the filial piety required of sons in crisis moments of that nature.

Revisiting Ham's Brothers' Response: Pointer to the Gravity of the Offense (v. 23)

The narrator shows that Ham's offense largely constitutes seeing his father's nakedness. Noah's point of view is ultimately evident in verses 24–25, where the narrator describes the response of Noah when he wakes up from his drunken state and the action Noah takes against Canaan, Ham's son. He shows in verses 24 and 25 that seeing a father's nakedness was hurtful to Noah and led to his disastrous malediction.⁴¹ However, it is verse 23 that reiterates the major contention in the story—seeing a father's nakedness. The narrator's point of view is clear in verse 23. It seems that seeing a father's nakedness by itself, advertently or inadvertently, was a grave social issue. As already alluded to, both the meticulous process of covering Noah's nakedness and the turning away of their faces point to the weight of the offense entailed. The word order in the statement, 'אֲבִיהֶם לֹא רָאוּ וְעָרְוָה lit. 'the nakedness of their father they did not see' (v.23) itself attests to how serious it would have been for them to see the nakedness of their father.

Alter is among scholars who rightly observe that “the mere seeing of a father's nakedness was thought of as a terrible taboo so that Ham's failure to avert his eyes would itself have earned him a curse.”⁴² The first time nakedness is mentioned in Genesis 2:25 is associated with shame: “*And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not*

instance that involves the gods. But even more significantly, the actions of El are ignored. The Canaanite gods seem to drink till intoxication levels (48). Yet using Noah's reaction as part of the evidence for incriminating Ham with regard to his actions assumes Noah's moral standing and it ignores the negative role he plays in influencing Ham's action. It also assumes that Noah's judgment was justified.

⁴¹ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 420, describes the response as “Noah's strongest contempt.”

⁴² Alter, *Genesis*, 1997, 40. See also Keim. The implication of shame in instances where uncovering of body parts is expressed indicate a sense of shame (1 Sam 6:20; Isa 20:4) Also in Isa 47:3 the shame of the people is a consequence of their nakedness being exposed - “*Your nakedness will be uncovered, your shame also will be exposed; I will take vengeance and will not spare a man*” (NAS). Ezek. 16:37 is equally explicit that nakedness being seen by others was a degrading disgrace. God tells priests on how to take precaution, so their nakedness is not seen (Ex 20:26). Generally, a taboo or an abomination was a forbidden thing in ANE and Hebrew context (Halla, “Biblical Abominations and Sumerian Taboos,” 23–26). We note how even deities were invoked in the event of taboos – see an instance where Ninurta, Utu, Suen, Inanna, Marduk, Ea, Shulpa'e, Irra, et al are invoked in a taboo situation. Isaiah 5:8, states “Woe to those who add house to house *and* join field to field (NAS)”.



ashamed.” The immediate narrative function of pointing out that Adam and Eve were naked yet unashamed is in Genesis 3:7, but when after the Fall, they recognize their nakedness and experience shame.⁴³ It is Adam, the naked one, who hides from being seen by God (Gen 3:10). Verse 11 shows the link between the fall, nakedness, and resultant fear and shame: *He [the Lord God] said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”*⁴⁴

Through the action of the two brothers, the narrative displays a possible resolution to the crisis of Noah’s naked state —the father’s nakedness is covered. Yet their redemptive action also seems to heighten the *conflict* between Ham and his father, as verse 24 shows that Noah is offended by his son’s ‘actions.’ On the surface, the idea that Noah knew what his son had *עָשָׂה־לּוֹ* (done to him) raises a compelling possibility of physical action as the offense. In this paper, I have already argued that the offense is depicted as physical seeing of the father’s nakedness. Notably, there are other instances in the HB when *עָשָׂה* (do) has been used to refer to non-physical actions similar to seeing.⁴⁵ Until verse 23, a final resolution to an apparent familial conflict is still pending. Ideally, verse 23 could provide a final resolution, but the conflict is renewed when in verse 24, Noah reopens it. From a narrative point of view, the positive response of Ham’s brothers eventually leads Noah to pronounce the malediction and blessings in verses 25–27.⁴⁶

The argument for a taboo offense follows from previous arguments: The precipitating events point to Noah inadvertently leading his son, Ham, into sin, and if the sin Ham commits is literally seeing his father’s nudity, then the response of a curse is best explained in the light of a taboo offense. However, in a direct sense, Ham did not commit the offense. Rather, the offense happened to Ham, and it could only be a taboo offense, where the object of the curse stumbles into the father’s nakedness, occasioned by his father’s prior missteps. This renders the question of Noah’s wrath against Ham’s offense controversial. Arguably, Noah may have

⁴³ The text depicts physical nudeness in the narrative, bringing in the aspects of covering to hide the nudity, even if it has spiritual significance.

⁴⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1:200, 71, points out that shame was not a personal guilt, but rather something “triggered by circumstances completely extrinsic to the speaker (Judges 3:25; 2 Kings 2:17).”

⁴⁵ In Exodus 18:13–14 Moses is rebuked for what he is ‘doing to the people’ (*לַעֲמֹת עֲשָׂה*) (v. 14) for judging the people (*לִשְׁפֹּט־אֶת־הָעָם*) (v. 13), which entails speech. Aaron is asked by Moses what the Israelites had ‘done to him’ (*לָךְ מָה־עָשָׂה*) (Ex 32:21) with regard to persuading him to make golden calf image. And in Numbers 11:15, Moses complains to God for giving him the difficult responsibility of leading stubborn Israel - *לִי אַתָּה־עָשָׂה* - ‘...you done to me.’ Therefore, since these texts are of a similar sort of *עָשָׂה* action it is plausible that, ‘seeing’ is a reasonable referent of *עָשָׂה*.

⁴⁶ There could be several contrasting commissions and omissions between Ham and his two brothers. However, what is more certain is that the fact that they covered their father without seeing his nakedness, as opposed to Ham’s predicament.



simply rushed into cursing his son, presumably because of the taboo associated with the incident and the experience of personal shame around the events.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the immediate plausible reasons for Noah's reaction to his son. I have also discounted some of the suggested reasons for Noah's curse action. First, I argue that telling the brothers was not the reason for Noah's curse – and that, on the contrary, Ham telling his father's predicament to his brothers could have been a commendable action. Second, although Ham did not cover his father when he found him naked, I argue that it is not the most plausible reason for Noah to have cursed Canaan. Third, I discount the suggestion that Ham may have committed an offense simply by entering the space where his father lay naked. Lastly, based on the narrative linguistic cues, and the behavior of Ham's brothers, I argue that Ham's offense was the inadvertent seeing of his father's physical nakedness, and that it was a taboo offense, a culturally grave offense, but not necessarily justifiable as biblically and therefore morally wrong. The inadvertent stumbling of Ham on his father's nakedness is a consequence of the precipitating events in the pericope for which Ham has no responsibility. The father bears the responsibility regarding the events leading to Ham's actions. So, even if Ham's fault is apparent and significant, Noah is culpable for the state of nakedness that faces him. It is, therefore, critical that Noah's cursing act be evaluated based on this scenario. It is plausible that Noah may have simply rushed into cursing his son, presumably because of the taboo associated with the incident. Noah, therefore, shares in the blame for the circumstances leading to the curse situation and the potential malfunction of his family.

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