

CURSE MOTIVES IN THE “CURSE OF HAM” NARRATIVE: LAND FOR YAHWEH’S LANDLESS PEOPLE?

Mohamed Shahid Mathee

Department of Religion Studies

University of Johannesburg

E-mail: smathee@uj.ac.za

(Received 09/03/2016: accepted 03/04/2016)

Only the trees and beasts and birds tell unmitigated truths,
because these poor things have not the power to invent.
In this men show their superiority to the lower creatures.
(Tagore 2002:22)

ABSTRACT

According to the “Curse of Ham” narrative in the book of Genesis (Gen 9:20–27), Ham gazed at his sleeping father Noah’s nakedness and did not cover him. When Noah awoke he cursed Canaan, Ham’s fourth and youngest son, and his offspring with slavery. Why did Noah curse Canaan and not Ham, the one who stared at his nakedness? And why did Noah curse Ham for the seemingly trivial act of not covering him? This article links Ham’s doing to Noah and Noah’s cursing of Canaan to a motive for land, the land of Canaan for Israel, Yahweh’s landless people. The curse of Canaan justified casting the Canaanites out of the land. It argues that Ham’s deed and Noah’s curse were invented by the Yahwist (J) author of the narrative to realise this motive of land for Israel.

INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 9:26, Noah curses Canaan and his offspring to slavery. Who is Canaan and what did he do to Noah for the latter to curse him? According to Gen 9:18, Canaan is the son of Ham – Ham is called the father of Canaan; Gen 10:1 presents Canaan as the fourth and youngest son of Ham. Canaan did nothing to Noah, at least from what is apparent from the text. It was Canaan’s father Ham, Noah’s youngest son, who gazed at the drunk and sleeping Noah’s nude body without covering him. Ham’s gazing at his father’s nudity appears innocent, without evil motive or intent. This biblical narrative, Gen 9:18–27, is known as the “Curse of Ham” narrative. Many scholars of the Bible, ancient and modern, have regarded the narrative as enigmatic (Hepner 2001). To make sense of the narrative, they assume that Ham did more than only stare at the nude body of the drunken and sleeping Noah. In this vein they employ a host of

Biblical exegetical tools, parallel biblical narratives, extra-biblical narratives, ancient Middle-Eastern sex omens (Guinan 1997:470), etc. Their readings range from Ham sodomising Noah (Goldenberg 2010:4–5),¹ to castrating him (Goldenberg 2010:7–8),² and to having an incestuous relationship with his mother, i.e., Noah’s wife (Bassett 1971).³ And even if Ham only stared at Noah’s nudity, it suffices as sexual abominableness (Yamauchi 2009:48).⁴ In short, Ham’s “deed” was of a sexual nature, whether by commission or omission, explicit or implicit, homo and hetero.

In this article, I offer a reading of the “Curse of Ham” narrative that identifies the cursing of Canaan with a motive for land – land for the Israelites, Yahweh’s landless people. Thus my reading sees no enigma in Ham’s gazing upon Noah’s nakedness and Noah’s curse of Canaan and hence no need to unravel what Ham did to Noah more than just gaze at his nudity and the severity of Noah’s curse. Rather, it will argue that the narrative is an invention of the Yahwist source (J). I see in the “Curse of Ham” narrative an initiating of the Hebrew claim over the land of Canaan. Land is central to the making of the Hebrew (Jewish) people and their God Yahweh’s covenant with them as His chosen people. As Emmanuel Levinas (1989:192) says, “Even their land rests on the Revelation. Their nostalgia for the land is nourished by texts.” The land

¹ This is the view of the third-century C.E. Jewish sage, Samuel. He shows the sexual connotation of the verb-word *‘asah* as in the biblical phrase “*Asher ‘asah lo beno ha-qatan*” (“what his youngest son did to him”) in Hebrew and other cognate languages. In Ezek 23:3 and 8 *‘issū*, “they squeezed [your virgin nipples]” and 23:2 *ba-‘sot = ba-‘assot* “in the squeezing of Egypt your nipples (i.e., when Egypt squeezed your nipples)”. The roots of the word Ham (*ḥmm; yḥm*) connote the sense of sexual heat.

² This is the view of Rav, another third-century rabbi. Rav applied the *midah keneged midah* principle, i.e., the punishment fits the crime. Noah’s curse of Canaan to eternal slavery meant that Canaan’s offspring would remain forever “dead”, almost as unborn beings; although not dead, the slave is “dead”; a genealogical isolate; a constituent element of the slave relation is the status of a socially dead person. Since Ham’s act deprived Noah of future descendants the lineage of Canaan was punished with a dead-but-not-dead status. Noah’s curse paralleled the crime of castration.

³ The Hebrew expression *ra’ah ‘erwah* (“to see a man’s nakedness”) means to have sexual intercourse with his wife.

⁴ Ham’s frivolous looking represented the first step in the abandonment of a moral code; it was an act of patricide. To look at someone’s genitalia was to take, to wield power over them, making him/her vulnerable and exposed. He eliminated Noah as authority, guide, teacher of law, custom and a way of life.

element is implicit in the “Curse of Ham” narrative; explicit mention is made in Gen 15:18–21 and elsewhere.

My reading of the “Curse of Ham” narrative rests on an analysis of the twice repeated phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan” in Gen 9:18 and Gen 9:22 and the curse of Canaan in Gen 9:25–27. The approach of this paper is thus a literary analysis. The analysis depends on the source criticism of the Documentary Hypothesis of the Pentateuch (Viviano 1999; Westerman 1987, 1992). Source criticism has, of course, been the subject of controversy (Wenham 1991). My analysis focuses specifically on the role of the Yahwist (J) author of Gen 9: 20-27 and the Priestly (P) author cum redactor of the “Curse of Ham” narrative. More precisely, I will show that Gen 9:20–27 was written/created by the Yahwist writer of the Pentateuch at a time of Hebrew national consciousness and statehood in the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E. (Viviano 1999:40).⁵ The writer wrote to show this quest for land to be a just quest. However, he was confronted by the presence of the Canaanites in the land reminding the Hebrew claim over the land that the land was not empty at the time of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. The article will also look at the modern Zionist/Jewish claim over Palestine as the historic and exclusive homeland of the Jewish people to show the continuum between it and the ancient quest for land. Both the Davidic state of the tenth century C.E. and the Israeli state of 1948 were/are imagined on the exclusion of the natives.

In my reading of the “Curse of Ham” narrative, I do not give consideration to the meaning and usage of individual words such as *‘asah* in the narrative – and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible—the *midah keneged midah* principle, symbolism, etc. My reading of the narrative begins at Gen 9:18 and ends at Gen 10:1, although not every passage/verse between Gen 9:18 and Gen 10:1 will be discussed.

And the sons of Noah that went forth from the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, *and Ham was the father of Canaan*. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was populated ... And Ham, *the*

⁵ According to the Newer Documentary Hypothesis, put forward by Julius Wellhausen (1927), four sources or documents were edited together to form the Pentateuch. The four documents are the Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomist (JEPD) sources.

father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without ... And Noah awoke ... and knew what his youngest⁶ son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan ... And he said, blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant ... Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth: and *unto them were sons born after the flood* (Canaan did not exist at the time). The sons of Japheth; Gomer and Magog, and Madai and Javan ... And the sons of Ham: Cush, and Mitzraim, and Phut, and Canaan ... The children of Shem; Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram (Gen 9:18 to Gen 10:20, emphasis added).

Thus my reading begins before Ham’s “act” and continues beyond Noah’s curse. Reading the narrative this way, I hope to show the motive behind Noah’s “cursing of Canaan”. The phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan” is first mentioned in Gen 9:18, when Noah and his three sons step out of the ark then in Gen 9:22 when Ham saw Noah’s nakedness.

The repeated phrase, as Gunther Wittenberg (1991:47) shows, was inserted by a Pentateuchal redactor. The insertion of the repeated phrase has a rhetorical function insofar as it links Ham to Canaan, i.e., Ham’s “doing” for which Noah “curses” Canaan. In short, the rhetorical function of the inserted phrase shows or contains the motive for the curse. In my reading, I therefore omit the phrase.⁷ Thus with the phrase

⁶ There is an interesting and telling contrast between youngest and eldest in some Old Testament narratives. The youngest son is innocent (Abel), divinely favoured (Isaac and Jacob), beautiful and powerful (Joseph), brave (David), wise (Solomon), etc. The eldest son is harsh of character, cruel, hateful, betrayal, of violent temperament, stubborn, etc., a murderer (Cain), wild ass and hostile (Ishmael), cruel and hateful (Esau), sexually perverse (Rueben), and simply excluded from the blessing of (Ephraim, Joseph’s eldest son). The favourable status granted to all the youngest sons in these narratives is instrumental in the making of Israel as the chosen nation. God’s covenant is given to Isaac, the birth right to Jacob (through the connivance of his mother Rebecca), Manasseh, Joseph’s younger son alone receives Jacob’s blessing. The “Curse of Ham” narrative “strays” from the pattern. Here the youngest son is immature, sexually perverse (albeit though inference), and disrespectful.

⁷ The New International Version (NIV) and International Standard Version (ISV) English

“And Ham was the father of Canaan” omitted/bracketed, Gen 9:18–19 reads,

And the sons of Noah that went forth from the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was populated ... And Ham saw the nakedness of his father (Gen 9:18–19).

The phrase “These three were the sons of Noah” in Gen 9:19 may be bracketed too, as Gen 9:18, “and the sons of Noah” already alludes to Noah’s three sons.⁸ Its omission will not disturb the coherency and flow of the narrative. The narrative will then read,

And the sons of Noah that went forth from the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth. And of them the whole earth was populated.

It was sufficient that Ham be introduced merely as Ham and not as the father of Canaan, just as Shem and Japheth are not introduced as fathers of their sons. The inserted phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan” raises some questions: why, of all Noah’s grandsons, is only Canaan mentioned alongside Noah’s three sons? Why are Canaan’s three older siblings, i.e., Ham’s three other sons as well as Shem and Japheth’s sons not mentioned? Only in Gen 10:15 is Canaan mentioned alongside his three older siblings Cush, Mitzraim, and Put. To put the interrogative in the negative, why are the rest of Noah’s grandsons, i.e., Canaan’s siblings and first cousins not mentioned in Gen 9:18 stepping out of the ark? And why was Ham singled out as a father (the father of Canaan)?

Can the singling out of Canaan and Ham, Ham as the father of Canaan (the inserted phrase) be linked to a motive? I am inclined to the affirmative. The motive was, first, to introduce Ham as the perpetrator of a future “repugnant act” against Noah, hence Ham’s singling out, among his two siblings, as a father (the father of Canaan). But more importantly, it was to designate Canaan as the recipient of Noah’s

translations of the Old Testament bracket the phrase (cf. Wittenberg 1991:48).

⁸ I go further and suggest that even the phrase “And of them the whole earth was populated” can be omitted. Noah’s three sons’ status as the progenitors of the future world generations has no indispensable role here since the *toledot* (the table of nations or descendants of Noah’s sons) is the concern of Genesis 10.

response; the locus of his retribution against Ham’s “act”. The reader is given a premonition of something about to befall Canaan. This explains Ham and Canaan’s singling out in Gen 9:18 and 22 as father and son. It makes sense of Canaan as the recipient of the curse to come. Canaan was to carry the penalty of Ham’s “act”, however disproportionate the curse appears to be to the act. Hence Canaan is already mentioned before Ham saw Noah’s nakedness.

The rhetorical function of the inserted phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan”, Gen 9:18 and 22, i.e., of Canaan’s singling out is affirmed in Gen 9:25 when Noah curses Canaan. Here Canaan is simply called Canaan, not the son of Ham; or Ham is no longer called the father of Canaan.

He [Noah] said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. And he said, blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth ... and Canaan shall be his servant.

The phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan” is dispensed with. Canaan’s connection to Ham as his father is severed, a connection so emphatically stated and maintained prior to and at the time of Ham’s “deed”. In fact, Ham is completely dispensed with while Shem and Japheth feature, being blessed by Noah. Similarly, in Gen 10:1, “And these [are] the account of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth”, Ham is not called the father of Canaan. The phrase “these three were the sons of Noah” (Gen 9:19) is also no longer mentioned.

According to Wittenberg (1991:48), the redactor’s inserting of the phrase “Ham was the father of Canaan” did two things. First, it joined two completely independent traditions: the narrative of Noah’s drunkenness (Gen 9:20–27) and the genealogy of Noah (Gen 9:18–19). The story had originally nothing to do with the genealogy of Noah. Genesis 9:20–27 belongs to the stories of crime and punishment which form a distinct group within the primeval history of Gen 9:1–11 (Wittenberg 1991:48). Genesis 9:18–19 are the closing section of the flood narrative (Genesis 6 to 9) and at the same time the introduction to the family tree of Shem, Ham, and Japheth in the so-called Table of Nations (Gen 10). Second, it identified Canaan with Ham, for the curse on Canaan to apply to Ham (Wittenberg 1991:50, 56).

The second point shows, according to Wittenberg, the deep-going fundamentally political enmity between Israel, the descendants of Shem, and the Canaanites. The Canaanites dominated and exploited Israel as the feudal tax collectors at the time of Israelite settlement. Although the curse has historicity, the insertion of the phrase transforms it into a system of Canaanite servitude of Shem/Israel. Ham's involvement arises from him being the ancestor of the Egyptians through his son Mizraim. Egyptian imperialism ruled over Israel. In other words, by identifying Ham with Canaan, the redactor aimed at applying the curse on Canaan to the Egyptians.

In this vein, Wittenberg argues that Canaan was Noah's son, his youngest son, not Ham's son; "Canaan and Shem were brothers in the story and in real life" (Wittenberg 1991:49). His basis for this view is Gen 9:25, "Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves he will be to his brothers". If the inserted phrase, "Ham was the father of Canaan" is bracketed the text will read "Canaan saw his father's nakedness".⁹ Canaan, Noah's youngest son, committed the outrage against Noah, and therefore rightly deserves Noah's curse.

Wittenberg's thesis that Canaan was Noah's son has no foothold in the text. Genesis 5:32 (one hundred year before the flood), Gen 7:13 (at the time the family enters the ark), Gen 9:18 (when they step out of the ark), and Gen 10:1 mention only Shem, Ham, and Japheth as Noah's sons. Genesis 6:10 and Gen 7:7 refer to Noah, his sons, his wife, and sons' wives without giving the sons' names. The repeated absence of Canaan in three direct and other indirect passages between Gen 5 and Gen 10 is too overwhelming and conspicuous to be dismissed or ignored.

If Canaan was a son of Noah should Gen 9:18 not have read, "And the sons of Noah that went forth from the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, and Canaan, these four were the sons of Noah"? Wittenberg accepts the existence of both Canaan and Ham as individuals and that Canaan committed a violation against Noah.¹⁰

⁹ Wittenberg's primary aim in his article is to refute the longstanding erroneous notion of Noah's curse falling on Black people and hence their condemnation to slavery. Hence Wittenberg is at pains (as he clearly states) to show that Noah's curse on Canaan has nothing to do with his genealogy.

¹⁰ Wittenberg's account of Canaan and Ham, to use the words of Simon Joseph, is a rational explanation, an attempt to preserve a sense of religious mystery in the face of the threat

However, they are not just individuals in the narrative, they are a system or symbols of man’s deep-seated urge to dominate and enslave others (Wittenberg 1991:48–56). This may explain why Wittenberg is not concerned with Noah not blessing Ham.¹¹ Canaan did the outrage against him, not Ham.

Canaan does not step onto the ark. According to P (Gen 7:4, 12), the rains lasts forty days and takes twenty-one days to recede, making his birth on the ark impossible. According to J (Gen 7:24, 8:23), the flooding takes 150 days and by the time the waters recede, one year and ten days have passed, a conceivable period for his birth on the ark, even if conceived on it. However, Canaan does not step out of the ark with them. His birth then would have been after the deluge, but how long after they stepped down from the ark and before Noah planted grapes, made wine, and got drunk and naked? Genesis 9:20–21 does not indicate how long. Wittenberg’s association of Canaan with the youngest son in Gen 9:24, i.e., the one who gazed at Noah’s nudity, is conjecture.

In our view, the claim that the youngest son refers to Ham can be substantiated notwithstanding the fact that it is inconsistent with and contradicts Ham’s mention in Gen 5:32, 7:13, 9:18, and 10:1 as Noah’s second son after Shem and before Japheth. However, many modern scholars of the Old Testament have adequately explained the inconsistencies and contradictions of the biblical text as part of its writing and redaction.¹² This article is however not primarily concerned with who the youngest son refers to. Its fundamental concern is to show that nothing was done against Noah; there was no “doing” by Noah’s younger son, whether that son was Ham or – as Wittenberg claims – Canaan.

posed by rationalism (Joseph, 2012:23). Wittenberg affirms the historicity of Canaan and the outrage he committed. I am inclined to the view that there is no individual named Canaan, including the Canaan mentioned in Gen 10:6.

¹¹ For contemporary works that discuss the opinions of rabbis and church fathers as to why Noah cursed Canaan and not Ham, see Newby (1988:68) and Goldenberg (2003:141–156).

¹² For example, Baruch de Spinoza touches on the inconsistent usage of the name Yahweh by the patriarchs of Israel (Abraham and sons) although the term did not exist (was not known) in their day (Spinoza n.d.:129–130). For more on biblical criticism see McKenzie and Haynes (1999). In this vein, we can refer to what Sigmund Freud calls poetical invention in biblical narrative (Freud 1959:50), although Freud’s reading was not based on the source, but psychoanalysis.

Genesis 9:24–27 is the outcome of the conspicuous introduction “And Ham was the father of Canaan” in Gen 9:18 repeated in Gen 9:22 at the time of the “doing” to Noah. The detachment between Ham and Canaan in Gen 9:25–27 when Noah “curses” Canaan is instructive. Ham is dispensed with, his name is dropped as the inserted phrase “Ham was the father of Canaan” had served its rhetorical function. He “did the outrage” against Noah which enabled the latter to “curse” Canaan. Noah’s “curse” and before it Ham’s or Canaan’s “act” were meant to gain for Yahweh’s chosen people the land of Canaan.

NOAH’S GENEALOGY VIS-À-VIS THE MOTIVE OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Genesis 9:18–19 introduces Noah’s genealogy after the flood and was originally connected to Gen 9:28–29, Noah’s remaining years and death into Gen 10:1–32, the elaborate outline of the genealogies of Noah’s three sons in their clans, languages, territories, and nations. Canaan then, like his siblings and cousins, is not mentioned from the beginning but only in Gen 10:6–20. Genesis 9:18–19, 28–29, and Gen 10:1–32 belong to the Priestly source (P) given this source’s primary concern with priestly matters such as genealogies (Viviano 1999:41). The flow from Gen 9:18, 19 (excluding the phrase “Ham was the father of Canaan”) into Gen 9:28, 29 shows the logical and perhaps historical connection between Gen 7:6, the beginning of the flood, Noah aged 600, and Gen 9:28–29, Noah’s death, aged 950 years. The flow continues into Gen 10:1–32, the Table of Nations. Thus if Gen 9:20–27 is bracketed, it reads,

And the sons of Noah that went forth from the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth. And of them the whole earth was populated. After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Altogether, Noah lived 950 years, and then he died.

As mentioned above (Gen 9:20–27), the crime and punishment tradition, belongs to the Yahwist source (Westermann 1987:68, Viviano 1999:44). It was the Yahwist who inserted Canaan into Gen 9:25–27. He makes Ham commit the outrage (Gen 9:22) for Noah to curse Canaan (Gen 9:25–27). It makes sense that the curse of Canaan appears

in the Yahwist source given Yahweh’s propensity to curse. He observes the “wickedness” of humanity (Noah hearing of Ham’s “deed”), blots humanity out from the ground (the Canaanites from the land), and curses the ground (curses Canaan). Yahweh regrets, is pitiful, grieved and responds with rage. After he curses the ground, Yahweh establishes his covenant. Land is central to Yahweh’s temperament and covenant. The Yahwist author flourished during the reigns of David and Solomon, a period of intellectual growth and national consciousness (Viviano 1999:40). Grieved by Ham’s “deed”, Noah “curses” him. I read in Yahweh’s covenant, after promising never again to curse the ground (Gen 8:21), Noah’s blessing of Shem – and Japheth.

The Pentateuchal redactor was confounded with Canaan’s out of place mention in Gen 9:25–27. In order then to create flow from Gen 9:18–19 into Gen 9:20–27 on the one hand and Gen 10:1–32 on the other hand, he had to insert the phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan”. The gap between crime and punishment and genealogy was too pronounced. To preserve the two traditions, he interwove them into its present form (Westermann 1987:51). The redactor is most likely the same Priestly author of Gen 9:18–19. The final redaction of the Pentateuch bears the stamp of the priestly circles (Viviano 1991:41).

LAND FOR THE WORLD’S YOUNGEST NATION, ISRAEL

Like Wittenberg, I hold that Canaan and Ham are a system or symbols; the former represents the land and people of Canaan, while Ham is the symbol for Egypt. However, whereas Wittenberg reads the curse as the quest for Canaanite servitude to Israel and liberation from Egyptian imperialism, I associate the “curse of Ham” narrative with Israel’s quest for land. The inserted phrase “and Ham was the father ...” denotes the connection to Egypt, i.e., Israel’s bondage in Egypt and therefore liberation from Egypt. Ham, the ancestor of Egypt, is made to “do” against Noah to set the exodus in motion. But leaving Egypt caused the Israelites to wander in the wilderness. They needed land to settle on. Canaan was arguably the only land Yahweh could conquer; hence Canaan became the recipient of Noah’s “curse”.

The *toledot* or so-called “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10:1–32 lists the populations of the world as they descended from Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth after the deluge. It shows who settled where and where they were allocated land. Thus the Levantine coast with its hinterland is divided between the “Hamitic” Canaan and the Semitic Lud. The Canaanites’ land stretches from Sidon in the north to Gaza in the south. “The term ‘Canaan’ originally referred to the Egyptian province of Canaan stretching from Mount Hor, the northernmost mountain of the Lebanese range in the north, to the Judean desert in the south, from the Mediterranean in the west to the river Jordan in the east” (Wittenberg 1991:49). The land was inhabited by numerous peoples. To this land were tied the destinies of the landless “Semitic” Israelites.

For Jan Retsö (2003:213–216), the significance of the *toledot* is the emergence of Israel as the last people as descendants of Shem. Prior to the *toledot*, the peoples of the earth are presented as belonging to one family as descendants of Adam. Israel did not exist from the beginning as a family; it emerged only later as the little brother of all the others, the last people in the world to emerge. As Arun Kumar Wesley (2003:380) points out,

These listings show theological motives that inevitably demonstrate a tendency to arrange different groups in priority thereby attaching the greatest significance to the Israelites as an ethnic and national entity greater than all other peoples of the earth ... Gen 10 presents us with a theologically motivated catalogue of people. It is not an objective historical account ... Gradually the descendants of Noah not related to Shem become increasingly insignificant in the accounts and their appearance if any is only to enhance the priority of the Israelites.

But this last nation to emerge, Yahweh’s chosen people, was not allocated any land. Of all Shem’s offspring, only Israel¹³ is not allocated any land (Retsö 2003:217–218).

¹³ This is in contrast to the offspring of Ishmael and Esau (both offspring of Shem, children of Abraham and Isaac), cousins who are allocated land the south-western corner of Palestine.

It is therefore not accidental that Shem, from whom Israel descends, is clearly the biggest benefactor from Ham’s “doing” and Noah’s “curse”.

JUSTIFICATION FOR CONQUEST: SEXUAL PERVERSION

Since Israel was not allocated, or did not have land, it had to obtain land. It did so through the defeat and violent conquest of Canaanite city-states as stated in the accounts of the book of Joshua. The “curse” of Ham was a reference to the conquest of the Canaanites by the Israelites, either as a prophecy or as a *prophecy after the event* (Yamauchi 2009:51, emphasis mine). The biblical account of Israel’s violent conquest of Canaan did not begin with military altercation, as a naked act of war merely informed by a will to conquer the Canaanites’ land. Rather Israel’s military conquest of Canaan was preceded by a moral/religious justification: the sexual deviation and debauchery of the Canaanites.

The Canaanites’ immoral sexual conduct not only justified and but also necessitated Israel’s invasion and inheriting of their land. Yahweh gave exclusive ownership of the land of Canaan to his chosen and pure people because the Canaanites committed sexual abominations. They defiled the land and so doing, they rendered it “empty”. The result of sexual depravity was divine-approved confiscation of land. The loss of their land was social death for the Canaanite peoples just as Noah’s cursing of Canaan to slavery signalled social death for him. In short, the Canaanites were the *raison d’être* for their conquest because they apparently committed certain acts.

Here I imagine that the Yahwist author of the “Curse of Ham” narrative did intend Ham’s “act” as one of sexual perversion or sexual in nature. However, he deliberately couched it in ambiguous terms, because he was aware of other traditions enumerating the sexual abominations of Canaan – and other *goyim* – anticipating later writers to make the connection between Ham’s “act” and sexual perversion/abomination (castration, sodomy, incest, etc.).

However, because the sexual nature of Ham’s “act” was presented in ambiguous language and not as an explicit sexual act an explicit justification was required. The

particular biblical passage that speaks explicitly about sexual perversion and abominations is Leviticus 18:2–30. As Leviticus is regarded as entirely the work of the Priestly author (Viviano 1999:41), the passage’s explicit mention of Canaanite sexual abominations are suitable to qualify the ambiguity of Ham’s deed in Gen 9:22 as sexual in nature. We have already referred to the intervention of the Priestly author as a redactor to make sense of Canaan’s out of place mention in the Yahwist Gen 9:25–27.

None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness ... the nakedness of thy father, or the nakedness of thy mother, shalt though not uncover, she is thy mother ... the nakedness of thy father’s wife¹⁴ shalt though not uncover: it is thy father’s nakedness ... Do not defile yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations (all but Israelites) are defiled *which I cast out before you*. And the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land itself vomits out her inhabitants. You shall therefore keep my statutes ... and shall not commit any of these abominations ... (for all these abominations have the men, i.e. non-Israelites, of the land done, which were before you, and the land is defiled). That the land spew you not out also, when ye defile it, as it spewed out the nations that were before you ... Therefore shall ye keep mine ordinance, that ye commit not any one of these abominable customs, which were committed before you, and that ye defile not yourselves therein: ... (Leviticus 18:6–30, emphasis added).

Unlike the “Curse of Ham” narrative, the Leviticus passages are not a narrative, but in the form of legislation, a proscription. The passages ostensibly admonish and proscribe the Israelites from acts of sexual perversion lest they defile the land. The bulk of Leviticus 18:6–20 is on the uncovering of nakedness (Ham not covering Noah’s nakedness inverted). Leviticus 18:21–30 are on a variety of abominable acts: adultery with the neighbour’s wife, profanation of God’s name, homosexuality, and

¹⁴ It is not absolutely clear whether the phrase “father’s wife” refers to biological mother or step-mother.

bestiality. The proscription recalls the sexual perversions of the *goyim* that are made to have transpired prior to Yahweh’s conquest of Canaan.

But, more importantly, they inform the Israelites that because the *goyim* were guilty of sexual perversion, Yahweh cast them out of the land. They defiled the land with their acts of uncovering the nakedness of their fathers, mothers, fathers’ wives’, sisters, etc. Because the Israelites, Yahweh’s chosen people, were pure and not defiled by sexual perversion they were rewarded with land. The Leviticus chapter does not specify which *goyim*. However, since the Israelites were “given” the land of Canaan, it is highly plausible to suggest that it meant the Canaanites. According to von Rad (1963:133),

The Old Testament indicates in many places the amazement and abhorrence with which the newly arrived Israel encountered the sexual depravity of the Canaanites (cultic prostitution). In this, one saw aetiologically the true reason for their defeat before the invading Israelites.

The sexual perversity of the Canaanites or rather other peoples in Canaan is shown in other Genesis passages: the “violation” of Dina, Jacob’s daughter by the Hivite Shechem (Gen 34:1–31), and Lot’s incest with his two daughters (Gen 19:31–38), etc. Lot’s incest with his daughters marks the birth of the Moabites and Ammonites, Canaanite peoples who were often at war with Yahweh and Israel. Dina’s “violation” by Shechem (or consensual sex with Shechem) allows Dina’s brothers to put to sword Shechem and his whole family, loot their city, seize their animals, carry off all their wealth and enslave their women and children. The sexual perversion of these Canaanites was a justification for their treatment and for losing their land and property.

Egypt (Ham) is also linked to sexual abomination (Gen 12:11–20). They would kill the husband of a beautiful woman and she would be taken into the Pharaoh’s home as his wife. For this reason, the Hebrew Abram introduced Sarai as his sister and not as his wife when he temporarily settled in Egypt. However, Yahweh saved Sarai from the Egyptians’ (Ham’s) sexual depravity by afflicting Pharaoh’s house with plague. Affliction with plague is analogous to casting out of the land. Both were

Yahweh's means of punishment. The people of Egypt were punished with plague at the time of Abram and again some six hundred years later with Abraham's descendant Moses. The explicit mention and description of the sexual perversity of only the *goyim* of Egypt and Canaan ties in with Wittenberg's socio-political background explanation of the curse on Canaan and its connection to Ham.

The Leviticus passages differ from the "Curse of Ham" narrative in two respects. First, they proscribe uncovering nakedness (a prescription) while the latter describes Ham not covering nakedness (a statement). Secondly, sexual abominableness is explicitly described in the Leviticus passages. Not so in the "Curse of Ham" narrative; it has to be inferred. However the same rhetorical function of explicit and inferred sexual debauchery is at work in both cases: casting out from land of one people and granting of it to another people. The common thread is nudity: here prescriptive (a prohibition), there descriptive. Thus, by not covering Noah, Ham uncovered Noah's nakedness, even though Noah uncovered himself.

The Leviticus passage's proscribing/prohibiting of and its warning to the Israelites against sexual abomination had a rhetorical function of depriving from and granting of land. Read in this way, the Leviticus passages regarding the sexual depravity of the *goyim* were plausibly also invented by the biblical writers. The same motive was at play: land for the landless Israelites, children of Shem. Sexual depravation provided a justification for the *goyim's* expulsion from the land; the land was now "empty and uninhabited",¹⁵ and ready for the Hebrews, pure from sexual depravity, to occupy the land.

THE "CURSE OF CANAAN" IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Yahwist writers of the Bible wrote the "Curse of Ham" narrative to make the case for land for Yahweh's landless chosen people following their exodus from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness. The land was Canaan. However, the narrative would

¹⁵ One can imagine here the invention of "a people without land for a land without people", the modern slogan invented by the right-wing Christian Lord Shaftsbury, adopted by the Zionist, Israel Zengwell, and used so emphatically by Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel.

transcend the meaning and utility it had for its Yahwist author, who lived during a time of intellectual growth and national consciousness under David and Solomon. In a later age, toward the end of the nineteenth century C.E., its meaning and utility were recalled during a time of growing calls for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine (Canaan). This quest was realised in 1948.

In its claim that Palestine is the historical and exclusive homeland of the Jewish people, the Zionist movement, in both its atheist and religious representations, depended on the Hebrew Bible as a historical/religious source. The Hebrew Bible is a seminal source central to its claim and conquest. To be sure, the Zionist movement, both atheist and religious, does not cite the “Curse of Ham” narrative as “evidence” for its claim to Palestine as the homeland of the Jewish people. It cites other passages from the Pentateuch. However, what matters is not a particular biblical narrative, but biblical narrative as a whole. Of course, the claim that Palestine belongs to the Jewish people is not dependent only on the Hebrew Bible as evidence. Other sources are cited as “evidence” for this claim. These include archaeology (Dever 2001; Gnuse 1997).¹⁶ Another source/resource is modern international law, primarily in the form of United Nations resolutions. This source has in reality been the fulcrum of the Zionist claim. United Nations resolutions on historic Palestine with regard to the aspirations of the Jews in the diaspora and the indigenous Arabs were the creations of some Western nations as the “great powers” of the modern world. They could therefore create out of fifty six percent historic Palestine a Jewish homeland. But this forced carving of a Jewish state out of historic Palestine/Canaan depended on a prior discourse, not only on its military prowess.

¹⁶ Archaeological studies challenge the biblical accounts of the external invasion and violent conquest (e.g., the destruction of Jericho) of Canaan/Palestine by the Hebrews coming out of Egypt (Dever 2001:2–10). They show that Israel as a nation gradually developed out of Canaanites as social and political conditions changed at the beginning of the Iron Age, around 1200 B.C.E. The settlement of Israel in Canaan was a process of peaceful withdrawal, internal nomadism and peaceful amalgamation. The stories of conquest and destruction in the book of Joshua are said to be the outcome of fictional romantic folktales inspired by minor conflicts between the Israeli pastoralists and Canaanite cities such as Hazor. For a detailed account of the findings of these new studies, see Gnuse (1997:23–61).

As we pointed out above, the conquest of Canaan was preceded by a discourse of Canaan's alleged sexual behaviour and moral status; Yahweh's *blitzkriegs* came in the aftermath of that discourse. Likewise, the conquest of modern historic Palestine and ultimate creation of a Jewish state out of it came with a discourse – the discourse of colonialism. I use “discourse” in its Foucauldian definition. According to Foucault, a discourse is the way in which the world is brought into being, by which speakers and hearers, writers and readers come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (cited in Ashcroft et al. 1998:71).

Zionism and its claim over and conquest of Palestine are colonialist discourse. Besides the fact that a modern Jewish homeland in Palestine was the outcome of Western colonial military prowess, its very reasoning was colonial. The violence that birthed its creation was not only military but epistemic too.

The Western conquest of the non-European world is itself based on a clear genealogy of claims of privilege based on racial and religious difference. Thus the sixteenth-century Portuguese scholar João de Barros could write that although common law allowed all navigators to freely sail the seas, it applied only to the whole of Europe and its Christian inhabitants (Chatterjee 2012:33–34). The British and French called on the idea of *terra nullius*, i.e., that the lands they conquered were uninhabited, because they belonged to no-one. Britain and its empire was a single political community that was “Protestant, commercial, maritime and free” (Chatterjee 2012:52).

The Zionist narrative on Palestine shows the same thinking as the Portuguese, French, and British. The native Arabs lacked values. In a 1901 speech, the father of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, stated,

Palestine is our ever-memorable historic home ... We should there form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism. We should as a neutral State remain in contact with all Europe, which would have to guarantee our existence. We should form a

guard of honor about these sanctuaries, answering for the fulfilment of this duty with our existence (Herzl 2002:13).

A Jewish state would be the West’s last frontier to safeguard Western values of democracy, rule of law and progress in an unruly and uncivilised non-European East. Non-Westerner natives represent not only the absence of values; they are the negation of values (Fanon 1963:41). The Zionist narrative also saw Palestine as uninhabited, itself originally the British colonial *terra nullius*. However, the Zionist movement did not invent the idea of Palestine as an empty land and therefore a homeland exclusively for the Jewish people (Muir 2008:55). Rather, the notion was coined by right-wing Evangelical Christians. As early as 1843, Reverend Alexander Keith, a Christian Restorationist, wrote, “The Jews are a people without a country; even as their own land, as subsequently to be shown, is in a great measure a country without a people”. Already in 1853, the Englishman Anthony Ashley Cooper, Anglican evangelical and seventh Earl of Shaftsbury wrote, “Greater Syria including Palestine was ‘a country without a nation’ in need of ‘a nation without a country’. To be sure there is, the ancient and rightful lords of the soil, the Jews” (cited in Scult 1978:91). Israel Zangwill, an early Zionist, borrowed the slogan from Lord Shaftsbury and appropriated it for the Zionist claim over Palestine. In 1901 he wrote, “Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a country” (Garfinkle 1991; Zangwill 1901:615). This borrowing shows the colonialist character of Zionism and therefore its negation of the Palestinians in line with colonialist discourse. Golda Meir, the Israeli prime minister, reiterated this colonialist *terra nullius* idea when she said, “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people ... It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They didn’t exist” (*Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969, as per Wikiquote contributors). Simply put the Jews were a people without land for Palestine a land without people, Palestinians.

This modern Zionist narrative, Western colonial in essence, is centred on invention and/or denial of realities. It creates nations and peoples and land claims where they did not exist while negating peoples and their right to land that did and do exist. This narrative overlooks and even negates the complex, but historic accounts of the

continual making of peoples, nations, culture, religion, etc., in the Near East of which Palestine/Canaan is arguably the centre. As Abdullah Schleifer (1972:5) states,

The people of Palestine – an Arabian (i.e., Semitic) blend of Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, Phoenicians, Hebrews, and late-Arabians with Philistine, Roman, Greek, and Frankish flavouring – have lived out centuries and moved from one Semitic tongue to another in a series of religious-political experiences as animists, as Jews, as Christians, and finally as Muslims. And with the adoption of the language of the Qur’ān (Koran) as their ultimate idiom they have taken as a name for their modern cultural identity, ‘Arab’.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I linked the “Curse of Ham” narrative to land.¹⁷ The “curse’s” link to land has been pointed out by previous modern scholarship. However, the novelty of my article lies in my reading of the Yahwist author’s motive with inventing and inserting Canaan in Gen 9:25–27. I showed that the Priestly author inserted the phrase “And Ham was the father of Canaan” in Gen 9:18 and 22 to give flow to the narrative. I also argued that there was no “doing” against Noah and therefore no “curse” against Canaan. Hence, I began my reading of the narrative from the time Noah and his family stepped out of the ark, not from Ham’s “deed”, and end at the *toledot*, not Noah’s

¹⁷ At some point in history the curse came to be identified exclusively with Ham; more specifically, the blackness of some of his descendants. In this way the curse with slavery came to be identified with blackness and therefore race. For many, it was seen as the biblical justification for the enslavement of Black people. In his review of David Whitford’s book *The curse of Ham in the early modern era: the Bible and the justifications for slavery*, Christopher Ocker (2011: 405–407) highlights the link between the curse and some of Ham’s alleged descendants being of dark skin, that the men are macrophallic and hypersexual, and that they are idolatrous and sinful. However, the linking of the curse of Ham to race, i.e., blackness has been cogently refuted (Goldenberg 2003). Ocker’s review also shows that throughout his book, Whitford is mindful of the diversity of medieval exegetical traditions and mindful that some later Bible readers rejected Noah’s curse as a justification for slavery.

curse of Canaan. I argued that just as the Yahwist author wrote the “Curse of Ham” narrative as the motive for granting land to the landless Israel, they invented the justification for the realisation of this motive. They made Ham to stare at Noah’s nakedness and Noah to curse Canaan in return. Elsewhere they invent the *goyim*’s uncovering of nakedness, their killing of beautiful women’s husbands to possess them. The sexual perversion of the Canaanites conferred divine approval for the conquest of their land. However, only Canaan and Ham’s sexual debauchery are exposed as Yahweh only did conquer Canaan among all other lands. Yahweh was not able to conquer the lands and nations associated with Canaan’s other siblings Put, Mitzraim, and Cush: Libya, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Or Canaan was in close proximity following the exodus from Egypt as opposed to Ethiopia and Libya. I showed how biblical narratives (or some of them) are literary constructs that had motives and that can be used anytime in history whatever the original motive was at the time of their construction. I showed the role literature plays in the invention and making of worlds, nations and individuals. I also looked at the modern Zionist/Jewish claim over Palestine as the historic and exclusive homeland of the Jewish people as a continuum of the ancient Hebrew claim over the land. Except that this time, it was Yahweh who made the aspirations for land for His chosen people come true, but the hegemony of a Western colonial episteme and military machine.

The Yahwist writers of the Bible created aspirations, rights, claims, crimes and punishments. I view the “Curse of Ham” narrative as a sacred legend derived from and modelled on earlier traditions¹⁸ from the Near East designed to address the plight of the Hebrews in a certain era. As Tarif Khalidi (1994:1) says, “... traditions are untidy and elements that enter into their make-up themselves belong to the debris of earlier traditions”.

¹⁸ For example, the Ugaritic myth of the drunken El and his three sons. His two sons Thukamuna and Shunama dutifully cover him while the third sons Haby does not (Goldenberg 2010:1).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashcraft, B, Griffiths G & Tiffin, H 1998. *Key concepts in post-colonial studies* London: Routledge.
- Astren, F 2007. Review of “The curse of Ham: race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam”, *The Muslim world* 97:360–363.
- Bassett, F 1971. Noah’s nakedness and the curse of Ham: a case of incest, *Vetus Testamentum* 21/2:232–237.
- Chatterjee, P 2012. *The black hole of empire: history of a global practice of power*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Dever, W 2001. *What did the Biblical writers know and when did they know it? What archaeology can tell us about the reality of ancient Israel?* Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Fanon, F 1963. *The wretched of the earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press
- Freud, S 1959. *Moses and monotheism*. Trans. Katherine Jones. New York: Vintage Books.
- Garfinkle, A M 1991. On the origin, meaning, use and abuse of a phrase, *Middle Eastern Studies* 27/4:539–550.
- Gnuse, R K 1997. *No other gods: emergent monotheism in Israel*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Goldenberg, D 2005. *The curse of Ham: race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goldenberg, D 2010. What did Ham do to Noah’, in Perani 2010:1–10.
- Guinan, A K 1997. Auguries of hegemony: the sex omens of Mesopotamia, *Gender & History* 9/3:462–479.
- Hepner, G 2001. The relationship between biblical narrative and biblical law, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29/4:1–7.
- Herzl, T 2002. *Der Juden Staat*, trans. Sylvie D’Avigdor, MidEastWeb PDF Edition. Available: <http://www.mideastweb.org>. [Accessed 2015/03/04.]
- Joseph, S J 2012. *Jesus, Q, and the Dead Sea scrolls: a Judaic approach to Q*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. [WUNT 333]
- Khalidi, T 1994. *Arabic historical thought in the classical period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinas, E 1989. *The Levinas reader*. Edited by Sean Hand. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishers.
- McKenzie, S L 1997. Response: the curse of Ham and David H. Aaron, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65/1:183–187.
- McKenzie, S L and Haynes, S R (eds) 1999. *To each its own meaning: An introduction to biblical criticisms and their application*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Muir, D 2008. A land without people for a people without land, *The Middle East Quarterly* 15/2:55–62
- Newby, G D 1988. *A history of the Jews of Arabia*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Ocker, C 2011. Review article of David Whitford’s *The curse of Ham in the early modern era: the Bible and the justifications for slavery* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), *Church History* 80:405–407.
- Perani, M (ed.) 2010. “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious (Qoh 10, 12)”, *Festschrift Gunter Stemberger*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Retsö, J 2003. *The Arabs in antiquity: their history from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*.

- London: Routledge Curzon.
- Robertson, P O 1998. Current critical questions concerning the curse of Ham (Gen 9:20–27), *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/2:177–188.
- Schleifer, A 1972. *The fall of Jerusalem*. London: Monthly Review Press.
- Scult, M 1978. *Millennial expectations and Jewish liberties: a study of the efforts to convert the Jews in Britain, up to the mid nineteenth century*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Spinoza, B n.d. *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Trans. R.H.M. Elwes. London: George Routledge and Sons.
- Tagore, R 2002. *The home and the world*, trans. Surendranath Tagore. Bangalore: Rupa & Co.
- Viviano, P A 1999. Source criticism, in McKenzie and Haynes 1999:35–57.
- Von Rad, G 1963. *Genesis: a commentary*. Trans. John H. Marks. 2nd edition (revised). London: SCM Press Ltd.
- Wellhausen, J 1927. *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels (Prolegomena to the history of ancient Israel)*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter
- Wenham, G J 1991. Method in Pentateuchal source criticism, *Vetus Testamentum* 1:84–109
- Wesley, A K 2003. Sacralisation and secularization: an analysis of a few Biblical passages for possible racial overtones and ethnocentrism, *Asia Journal of Theology* 16/2:375–395.
- Westerman, C 1987. *Genesis*. Trans. David E. Green. London: T&T Clark International.
- _____ 1992. *Genesis: an introduction*. Trans. John J Scullion. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Whitford, D M 2009. *The curse of Ham in the early modern era: the Bible and the justifications for slavery*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Whitford, D M 2010. A Calvinist heritage to the “Curse of Ham: assessing the accuracy of a claim about racial subordination”, *Church history and religious culture* 90/1:25–45.
- Wikiquote contributors, n.d. Golda Meir, *Wikiquote*. Available: https://en.wikiquote.org/w/index.php?title=Golda_Meir&oldid=2151585. [Accessed 2016/09/30.]
- Wittenberg, G 1991. “Let Canaan be his slave” (Gen 9:26). Is Ham also cursed? *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 74:46–56.
- Yamauchi, E M 2009. The curse of Ham, *Criswell Theological Review* 6/2:45–60.
- Zangwill, I 1901. The return to Palestine, *New Liberal Review* Dec 1901:615.