

Another Look at Genesis 9: the curse on Canaan

By Bob Young

The text in question (ESV).

20 Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. 21 He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. 22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. 23 Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. 24 When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, 25 he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers."
26 He also said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.
27 May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant."

Many have questioned why the curse fell on Canaan rather than on Ham. A careful analysis and reading of the text will provide guidance for a correct understanding.

Let us begin by noting that the sons of Noah were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. There is no reason to doubt that the order given in 10:1 lists the sons in order of birth. Note that Ham is not the youngest son of Noah, but the second.

In reading the text, the word translated "saw" in 9:22, 23 can have a variety of shades of meaning. Possibilities include "became aware of, perceived, discerned." In v. 23, Shem and Japheth, the oldest and youngest sons of Noah, covered their father.

In v. 24, Noah learns what the youngest son had done to him. The reference is not to Ham. Contextually, this could hardly be a reference to Japheth. The "youngest son" reference is to Canaan. Canaan will serve his uncles.