

The Drunkenness of Noah

“And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. 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” (Genesis. 9:20-27).

This episode is so tightly written and compact in its detail that the interpretation many centuries later is very difficult. The account was condensed, no doubt, out of respect for Noah, the second father of the human race. In addition the fuller oral account was undoubtedly well known when the narrative was written. Thus the details that are not available to us would have been familiar.

The covenant that God established with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) follows God’s blessing when God charged Noah: “Be fruitful and multiply” (9:1). Now as we begin this section verses 18 and 19 shed light on the meaning of the events that will follow. In verse 18 Ham is identified as “the father of Canaan” (9:18). This is a common biblical literary technique of introducing important information out of place to capture the reader’s attention. In effect it says: “pay attention to this detail. It’s important.” The second clue to interpreting what will ensue occurs in verse 19 which points out that the earth’s repopulation was achieved by Noah’s three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth: “from these the whole earth was peopled” (9:19). To be more specific the text is asserting that Noah had no additional children.

Now to the plot. It is no accident that Genesis next informs us that Noah planted a vineyard (9:20). Its significance is more insightful than merely providing an explanation for the source of wine that was the instrument of Noah’s drunkenness. The wine itself becomes a clue that bridges the proceeding two verses with the events that follow.

In the ancient East Mediterranean world, wine was frequently connected with sexual potency. This is a familiar idea in the Old Testament. For example, wine has sexual overtones in the Song of Songs (1:2, 4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:2, 9; 8:2). In Isaiah (17:10-11) the Hebrew word *zemorah*, which refers to a vine branch with a cluster of grapes (see: Numbers 13:23), plays a part in fertility rituals. Wine will also play a role in the seduction of Lot by his daughters (Genesis 19:31-32). David will use wine to get Uriah drunk in a vain attempt to induce Uriah to have intercourse with his wife Bathsheba, so David’s adultery and her pregnancy could be concealed.

Thus Noah's use of wine is motivated by his desire to fulfill God's directive: "Be fruitful and multiply" (9:1). Remember, also, that Noah is well over 600 years old. This interpretation is further supported by the Hebrew word, *adoloh*, "in his tent" (9:21) which has an ending that generally denotes the feminine gender. The implication is that Noah "lay uncovered" (9:21) in his wife's tent or else she was with him in his tent.

Now Ham enters the scene. Just in case the reader missed the earlier reference and its significance, Ham is again identified as "the father of Caanan" (9:22). Then the text makes a cryptic statement: "[Ham] saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside" (9:22). In order to understand what occurred, we must decipher the expressions "saw" and "the nakedness of his father." In Leviticus we read: "the man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness" (Leviticus 20:11). This is a clear reference to incest. In addition the Hebrew word that is translated as "saw," (9:22), *raah*, (also "looking" or "gazing") has the added meaning of possessing that, which is viewed (Genesis 13:14-15; Deuteronomy 3:27).

Evidently, Noah became drunk in an attempt to bear additional children. At some point he fell asleep in a drunken stupor. Ham seized this opportunity to usurp his father's place as prophet, priest and king by pirating his father's procreative right through an incestuous relationship with the queen mother. Caanan is the illegitimate child of that immoral act. The other brothers, Shem and Japheth, on hearing Ham's boast respectfully support their father's rightful position (Genesis 9:23) and do not participate in his *coup d'etat* by assaulting the queen mother.

This interpretation makes understandable Noah's curse of Caanan (9:24) rather than his father, Ham. Caanan was the illegitimate son of this incestuous act. The meaning of the curse also becomes clearer. Ham attempted to supplant his father by sinfully substituting his potency, his generative powers, in place of his aged father who could no longer produce children. However, the father's curse thwarts Ham's evil plan. Thus, Ham is cursed where he is most vulnerable in the very son who was conceived in this disordering of the family order. This balances the scale. Ham attacks Noah's fatherhood. Noah curses Ham's illicit son.

The lessons contained in this episode on the role of fatherhood are a meaningful instruction today. Far too many contemporary fathers either abandon their children or else they abandon their proper role in relationship to their children. Often fathers' focus is on being a pal to their children rather than a principled role model and a resolute guide in the areas of discipline, direction and commitment to Christ, and a life of prayer. When fathers abandon their legitimate position in the family, the family order is inevitably disrupted. This leads to the disruption of society itself, as our crime rate among single males so eloquently attests. The curse of Cain is another example of how the sins of a father are visited on the children.

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