

My Three Sons Genesis 9-11

Play [My Three Sons video](#), starring Shem, Ham and Japheth.

How many of you remember this TV show, *My Three Sons*? Wow, you are all older than I realized! In an email to Answers in Genesis, founded by Ken Ham, a mother shared the story about teaching about Noah and his sons to her young daughter. When the mom mentioned Shem, Ham and Japheth, the little girl said, [“I thought it was Ken Ham and Japheth.”](#) This morning we will be covering this last little section of Genesis chapter nine, the story about Noah’s drunkenness and Canaan’s curse. You can almost hear Noah saying, My three sons! If you know how the story turns out, it’s not a complete expression of fatherly pride.

¹⁸ The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹ These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the earth.

²⁰ Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. ²¹ When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. ²² Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers outside. ²³ But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father’s nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father’s nakedness.

²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said,

“Cursed be Canaan!

The lowest of slaves

will he be to his brothers.”

²⁶ He also said,

“Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem!

May Canaan be the slave of Shem.

²⁷ May God extend the territory of Japheth;

may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,

and may Canaan be his slave.”

²⁸ After the flood Noah lived 350 years. ²⁹ Altogether, Noah lived 950 years, and then he died.

Many of us forget that this story is even in the Bible, tucked in as it is at the end of the flood event. If you read this quickly, you will be very confused by it. We left off in chapter nine with Noah sacrificing clean animals to the Lord as a form of worship and thanks for his unending mercy. Noah and his family had been spared. God has just made an unconditional covenant with him and the every living thing on the planet that he would never again destroy the world by water. We left Noah last week as a man who was deeply grateful and actively worshipping the Lord. Then the next eleven verses we see that he has made his own wine, got so stinking drunk that he fell asleep half naked and then he leveled a blistering curse upon his grandson.

What is going on here? How did Noah go so quickly from intimate worship to falling down drunk? First, we have to realize that there was a span of many years between verse seventeen and verse eighteen. When Noah and his family left the ark, his three sons didn’t have any children of their own. According to chapter ten, Ham’s son had four boys, the youngest of which was

Canaan. Therefore, enough time had passed for Ham and his wife to have born four children. Moreover, there would have had to be sufficient time to find grapes, grow and cultivate grapevines and turn the fruit of the vine into fermented wine. We can make a good guess that there were at least ten years between verse seventeen and verse eighteen. So Noah didn't go from intimate worship to falling down drunk overnight. But regardless of how long it took, Noah *did* go from intimate worship to falling down drunk.

As sad of an incident as this was, God was not surprised by Noah's fall from grace. Let me remind you what God said as soon as Noah stepped off of the ark. "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." (ESV) God knew that his grace and mercy did not permanently repair the sinful condition of mankind. Just as Noah did, you and I can go from intimate worship to falling down drunkenness. While drunkenness may not be our specific sin, there are endless ways in which we can also fall from grace. We do well to heed the warning from 1 Corinthians 10:12, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" Or as the well known King James puts it, "take heed lest he fall."

If I were judging this scene on my own I would probably come down pretty hard on Noah's drunkenness, but strangely, Noah's sin does not receive any comment from the Lord. On the contrary, this almost reads like the ancient art of blame shifting. When Noah woke up from his drunken stupor, instead of confessing his own sin, he immediately began to curse his grandson Canaan. This looks like the classic case of kicking the dog when you are angry or shifting all of your blame onto a subordinate. To our modern sensibilities, it may look like blame shifting, but something much worse was happening in this story. Ham committed a sin that was apparently many times worse than Noah's drunkenness. What was Ham's sin? I don't have the slightest idea. Scholars have debated this point for centuries and hardly any of them agree with one another. I can tell you this—it was not an innocent accident, as if Ham rounded the corner of his father's tent saying, "Good morning father, how did you sleep last ni...Aahhh!(covering his eyes

and running from the tent). Whatever Ham's sin was, it was certainly no accident. There was something particularly heinous about his sin. Whatever it was, it was the very opposite of what Shem and Japheth did—walking backwards and covering up their father's nakedness.



One of the great tragedies of our nation's history was the brutal slave trade where at its height about four million men, women and children were enslaved in order to fuel the economy of the south. Greater still was the fact that many so-called Christians used this text in Genesis nine as the primary Scripture defending the inferiority of Africans and their right to own slaves. Here are a few shocking quotes.

"It appears, from Genesis ix, 25, 26, and 27, that when there was but one family on the face of the earth, a part of that family was doomed, by the father Noah, to become slaves to the others. That part was the posterity of Ham, from whom, it is supposed, sprung

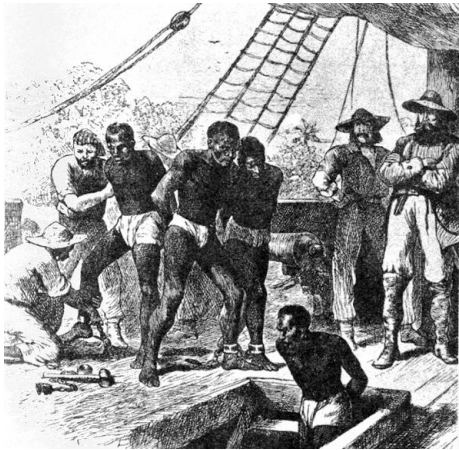
the Africans."¹

"And, perhaps, we shall find that the negroes, the descendants of Ham, lost their freedom through the abominable wickedness of their progenitor. . . . Canaan's whole race were under the malediction. These people were peculiarly wicked, and obnoxious to the wrath of God."²

A Defence of Virginia published in 1867, the Presbyterian Robert L. Dabney characterized Ham and his descendants as "wicked," "depraved" and "degraded in morals." He referred to "the indecent and unnatural sin of Ham" and characterized slavery as God's "punishment of, and remedy for . . . the peculiar moral degradation of a part of the race,"³



"Through a literal re-creation of the family of Man through Noah, Noah's three sons, Ham, Shem and Japheth were said to be the progenitors of the Black, Red and White races respectively. While all these races are said to have originated in the family of Noah, theories such as that promoted by Josiah Priest claimed that God, in His infinite Wisdom, foresaw the future destiny of the three sons and thus caused them to be born in their three differing colors."⁴

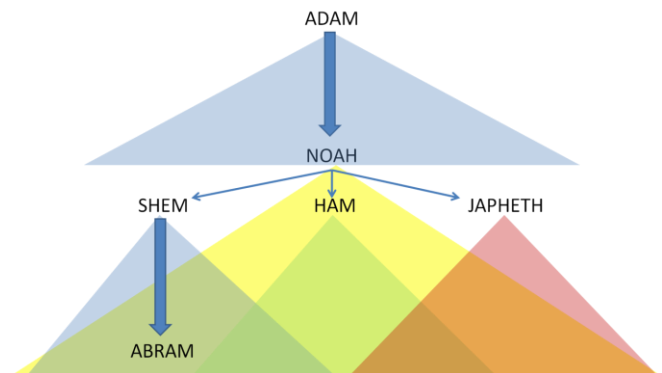


In addition to defending slavery based on this passage, these same people used Scripture to actively fight against abolition.

"The teachings of abolitionism are clearly of rationalist origin, of infidel tendency, and only sustained by reckless and licentious perversions of the meaning of the Sacred text."⁵

Can you believe this disgusting drivel?! The incredibly sad irony is that this passage actually proves the very opposite of what these pro-slavery advocates were arguing. Instead of proving the inferiority and division of one race, the sons of Noah prove that we are all one race. Genetically speaking, we are 100% equal. Of course this was true with Adam. For the first 1600 years of human existence, every man, woman and child were related to Adam. The flood killed everyone except Noah's family, but then the one race began all over again. The descendants of Noah's three sons eventually spread out over the earth and began their own progeny, but fundamentally, they were all one race just as everyone was one race in Adam.

I wanted you to understand this history for



several reasons. First, I want to make sure we thoroughly condemn this grievous part of our nation's history. It wasn't just a few fringe men who supported slavery from Genesis nine. Many of these men were pastors and church leaders. There were no TV's or blog postings in that day, but just as our political debates are fought over the airwaves and internet, their debates were fought in the churches and newspapers. All of these pro-slavery advocates published dozens of tracts and booklets that were widely disseminated in southern churches. There were probably hundreds of thousands of Christians who swallowed this teaching hook, line and sinker. Even though there is a distance of a 150 years and a thousand miles between us and them, I have never heard anyone specifically repudiate this tragic abuse of Scripture for the enslavement of our fellow man. This was wrong at every level and the fact that they used Scripture as their main argument for slavery, makes it all the more disgusting. This was a grave injustice against the blacks, a dark history of the Christian church and most importantly, an offense against God and his Word.

The other reason we need to understand this history is because it is yet another way that Scripture can be abused. Scripture has been used over the centuries as a club to beat people over the head and, as we have just seen, a literal whip to slice open the backs of slaves. Tell me, have we seen an end to the abusive use of Scripture? Thankfully, no one is using it to justify the owning and selling of slaves, but they do use it to justify every manner of evil and injustice. How did the ELCA denomination justify the ordination of homosexuals? Did they say, "We fully realize that Scripture condemns homosexual behavior, but we reject the authority of Scripture and reserve the right to ordain gay and lesbian clergy." If they had, at least that would have been an honest admission, but instead they claimed that Scripture was not sufficiently clear on the matter so they wanted to err on the side of inclusivity. In other words, they used Scripture to justify their unscriptural position. Nearly every cult and occultic group uses Scripture, or at least Scriptural ideas, to justify their religion and practice. I can guarantee you that when the anti-Christ appears, he will quote Scripture left and right. His knowledge of Scripture will far exceed my own and his persuasive speech will fall from his lips like sweet cherry blossoms. He will take Scripture, the Sword of the Spirit, and use it to lop off the heads of millions of Christians.

But long before that happens, you and I are in constant danger of being led astray by an abusive use of Scripture. Do you see how this danger is uniquely targeted at us? The very thing we love can be used against us. As soon as someone starts quoting Bible verses, our ears perk up and we are inclined to believe what they say. The fall of every Christian college, every Christian denomination and every individual Christian has not come from without, but from within. All of these failures are fundamentally due to a lack of understanding and belief in the clear teaching of Scripture. What if our church could be transported back to the cotton fields of Georgia in 1830? How many of us would have been swayed by the persuasive teaching of the pro-slavery advocates? How many of us might have owned slaves? "Impossible!" you say? Based upon statistics of southern churches, the vast majority of us would have been slave owners, pro-slavery advocates or at the very least, afraid to speak out against slavery.

Genesis is crystal clear on this point—we are all one race. Therefore, if we are all one big, happy genetic family, what is this curse on Canaan all about anyway? Well, it turns out that while we really are all one big, genetic family, that doesn't mean we're all happy and love one another. First of all, notice that this was not a curse on Noah's son Ham, but on his grandson, Canaan. At

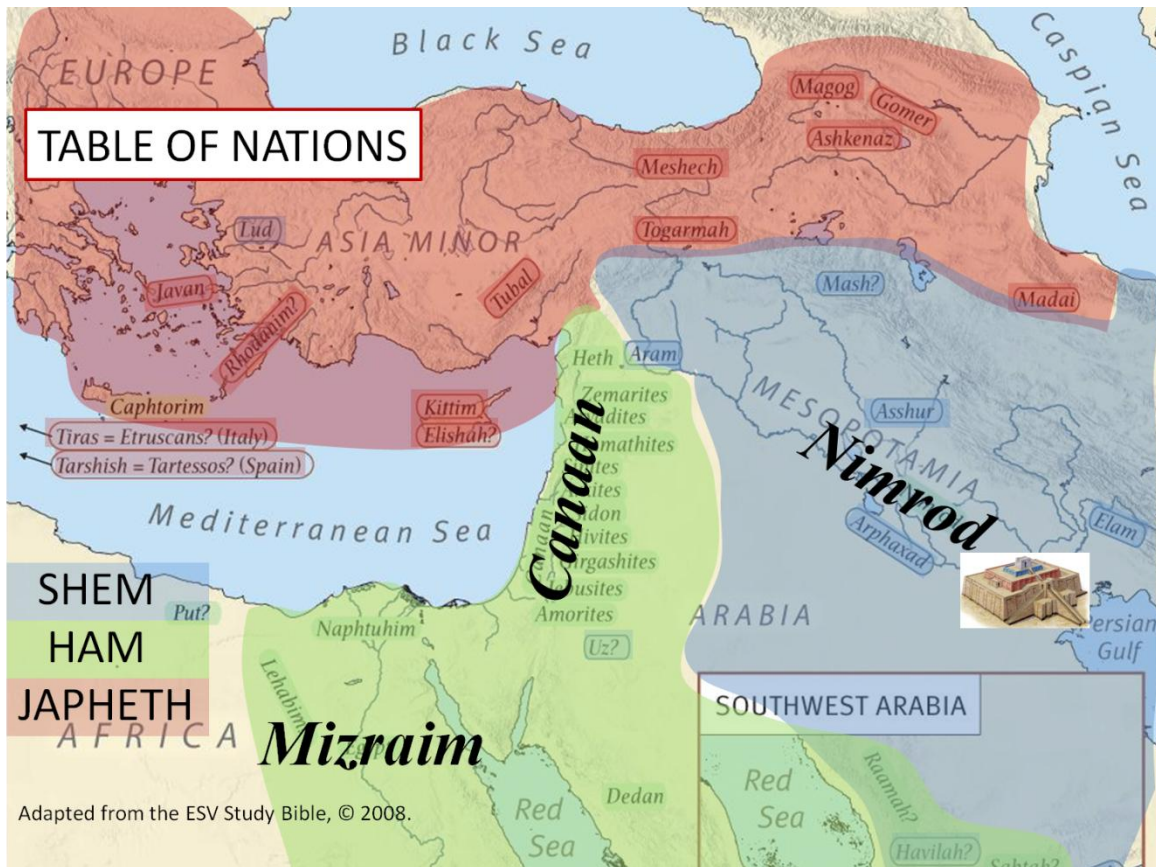
first glance, this seems to be even more confusing. It seems extremely harsh to condemn someone to a life of slavery for a single act of sin, but it's worse still to condemn the son of the man who committed the sin. This is not an unjust condemnation of Canaan, who may have been just a toddler at this point in time. Something much bigger was happening here.

The whole story is driving at a curse on Canaan and you can see this from the first verse.
¹⁸ *The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.)*

and then again four verses later...

²² *Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.*
 All of this mention of Canaan was very intentional on the part of the author, Moses. He wanted to make sure we understood that this was about Canaan, not Ham.

To understand the significance of Canaan, we need to jump to chapter ten. Chapter ten is the so-called Table of the Nations, the eventual division of Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham and Japheth. On this map, you can see the basic divisions of their descendants. Where did this division of nations start from? They all started in Babylon, right—at the Tower of Babel in chapter eleven. After God confused their languages, they began to spread out over the earth. In general, the descendants of Shem remained in the Mesopotamian region. The descendants of Ham moved west and south and the descendants of Japheth moved north and west, probably all the way over to Spain.



Where are most of us in this room descended from? The majority of us are descended from Japheth. As they moved into colder, northern climates, their skin color would have become progressively lighter, just as the skin color of the descendants of Ham became progressively darker in the hotter climate. Why did this happen? It happened through a process of natural selection. Now don't let the term natural selection frighten you. Some of you might be thinking I am promoting evolution. Although evolution depends upon a very unnatural definition of natural selection, natural selection is just a simple process of change within a species. Colder climates require lighter skin so the medium skinned people in the north began to die out. The hotter climates require a darker skin, so the medium skinned people in the south slowly began to die out. You see, what we call race is nothing more than a process of natural selection in the genes for skin color. This is all part of the amazing genetic diversity God created in humans. The lighter skinned people have lost the genes for dark skin and the darker skinned people have lost the genes for light skin. If you took genes from everyone in the world and mixed them together in a big pot, and you popped a man, who would it be? It would be Adam. Therefore, if you come from a racially mixed heritage, genetically speaking, you are much closer to Noah and Adam than everyone else at either end. Isn't that kind of cool to think about?

Now getting back to the topic of Canaan. Chapter ten lists the four sons of Ham and where three of the sons settled down to live. Nimrod stayed in Babylon (we'll see more of him next time), Canaan settled in the land of...Canaan (why do you think it is called the land of Canaan?!) and Mizraim, which is the Hebrew word for Egypt, settled in...Egypt. (Do you see how the Bible is the foundation for geography, sociology, science, etc?) Noah's curse was upon which son? Only Canaan—Nimrod and Mizraim were not included. Therefore, we see yet another reason why the pro-slavery advocates were dead wrong. This was not a curse on Ham. It was not a curse on the descendants of Mizraim, who eventually became darker skinned Africans, it was specifically a curse on the medium skinned Canaanites. In other words, this has nothing at all to do with the color of one's skin or with the African people.

Genesis 10:15 lists the descendants of Canaan. "Canaan was the father of Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites" etc. Do you recognize these names? If you know your Bible, the names of these nations read like a who's who of Israel's chief enemies. These are all Canaanite nations who dwelled in the Promised Land. Noah's curse on Canaan is a type of foreshadowing of the later conflict. But then we're back to one of the original problems. Is it really fair to condemn an entire nation based upon the sin of one man? First, we must be very careful when we accuse God of not being fair, because "fairness" will send us all to Hell. Second, what did God do in Genesis three? He condemned not just a nation, but the entire human race based upon the sin of one man. Third, it is my opinion that whatever the sin of Ham was, he passed it down through the generations. Do you recall Lamech in chapter four, the great, great, great, grandson of Cain? Cain was an unrepentant murderer and several generations later Lamech was an angry man who was ready to kill anyone and everyone who got in his way. Just as the sins of Cain were passed down to Lamech, so the sins of Ham were passed down to Canaan. We know that Canaan was a polytheistic, pagan culture whose religion was founded upon a routine dose of child sacrifice and sexual perversion.

Not only is there a complete absence of any justification of slavery of African Americans, but I see something amazing in this passage—I see the gospel all over this story. First of all, we have

conclusive evidence that we are all one race. This is not the gospel, per se, but it is a foundation for taking the gospel to all nations, tribes, peoples and languages. Many of the same people who justified the slavery of blacks also argued that blacks were not capable of being saved. When the Aborigines were discovered in Australia, they were thought to be the missing evolutionary link and also incapable of being saved. The gospel is meant for all people and Christ will not return until his gospel is taken to every tribe, nation, people and language. May we never discriminate in its propagation.

The second way I see the gospel in this story is through the potential for racial reconciliation. If we are all one race and if the gospel is for all, then there should never be even a hint of racism. In Ephesians 2:14 Paul wrote, *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.* Paul was speaking of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, but by application, the gospel removes the dividing wall of hostility between any two people groups. We are not just united by our common blood, but far more importantly, by our common faith in Jesus Christ.

Finally, I see the gospel in the foundation for the Promised Land and the promised Messiah. Where was the Promised Land? In the land of Canaan, right? This passage foreshadows the struggle with the Canaanite nations precisely because it was the Promised Land. Furthermore, the three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth will quickly narrow down to the descendants of Shem, to Abram and finally to Jesus. Therefore, this passage is a foundation for the Promised Land and the Promised Messiah.

Rich Maurer
December 6, 2009

¹ James Smylie, *Review of a Letter from the Presbytery of Chillicothe, to the Presbytery of Mississippi, on the Subject of Slavery* (Woodville: MS, 1836). <http://jsr.fsu.edu/honor.htm#25n>

² Frederick Dalcho's *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures Relative to the Slave Population of South-Carolina* (Charleston, 1823) <http://jsr.fsu.edu/honor.htm#25n>

³ Robert L. Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia and Through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (New York: Negro Universities Press, [1867] 1969), 90; 102. <http://jsr.fsu.edu/honor.htm#25n>

⁴ Josiah Priest, *Slavery as it Relates to the Negro or African Race* (1843).

⁵ <http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/foutz-slavery.shtml>