

**NO NAME WOMAN:
NOAH'S WIFE AND HETEROSEXUAL INCESTUOUS
RELATIONS IN GENESIS 9:18–29**

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[Noah's wife] was a nameless woman, and so at home among all those who were never found and never missed, who were uncommemorated, whose deaths were not remarked, nor their begettings¹.

I.

The terse language and riddling innuendo of Gen 9:18–29, which narrates how Noah comes to curse Canaan, the son of Ham, has engaged the interpretive energies of readers since the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud speculated that Ham had castrated his father². The language of this narrative, bristling with obscure phrases, loud hints of dreadful sexual transgression, and pious cover ups, has often left subsequent interpreters sensing that the story has meanings that the narrator declines to delineate. Indeed, the only thing that remains clear is that Gen 9:18–29 functions as an etiological myth to justify the permanent subordination of the tribes of Canaan. Canaan commits an unspeakable sexual crime against Noah's family that results in the subsequent physical displacement and sweeping rejection of the customs of the Canaanite peoples. Indeed, Israel's secure possession of the Promised Land is predicated on repudiating the cultural institutions of the preceding Canaanites. Whatever the larger and associated issues, however, interpretive positions have gener-

ally revolved around two broad questions. What was the nature of Ham's offense, such that when he "saw his father's nakedness" and told his brothers, Shem and Japheth, it merited the terrible curse of permanent servitude Noah pronounced over him³? Second, what was the rationale for the punishment of Canaan and why, if Ham committed the crime, would his son Canaan suffer the penalty instead?

Exegetical traditions have identified the deed for which Noah curses Canaan either as voyeurism, castration, or homosexual paternal incest. Like the explanation of voyeurism, the one of homosexual paternal incest has been argued in recent times, perhaps indicating a need, in some contemporary quarters, to discover homosexual acts as *the* sin at the heart of matters when possible, and to make this narrative chiasmic with the one of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19:1–14⁴. This article posits an alternate interpretation that, while neither traditional nor common, makes sense of Gen 9:8–27. Interpreting the offense of Ham as heterosexual *maternal* incest accounts for the greatest amount of information, explains the severity and nature of the curse of slavery, and why the curse is launched against Noah's grandson, Canaan, rather than the actual perpetrator, his son Ham. This interpretation, symbolically and literally, "uncovers the [incestuous] nakedness" of earlier Primordial Prologue narratives, and shows Gen 9:18–29 as chiasmic with the narrative of Lot and his two daughters in Gen 19:30–38. Finally, this reading not only accounts for the curious anonymity of Noah's wife who, given her considerable importance as the new mother of human life (in this enactment of second creation) would appear more logically to bear a personal name and identity⁵, but also for the specific contexts and rationales for effacing her identity while nonetheless making her anonymity *stand out* in the narrative by scrupulously disguising her name – even as the given "name" of Noah's wife; or, more correctly, Noah's woman (*eeshet Noah*)⁶.

The brief narrative of Noah and his three sons who repopulated the world – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – remains etched in collective memory and exemplifies the self-disguised context of unnamable crime that results in *unnaming* or attempting to cover the presence of Noah's wife.

The sons of Noah, who went forth of the ark, were Shem, Ham, and Japheth: and Ham *is* the father of Canaan. These *are* the three sons of Noah: and

of them was the whole world overspread. 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* against 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 youngest 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 their servant⁷.

The narrator names Noah's wife in four earlier instances (6:18, 7:13, 8:15, 8:18)⁸, and almost always in the context of her place in a *procession* including Noah, his sons, and his sons' wives entering or leaving the ark. Noah's wife – known up until this point only through her association with Noah – appears, like the sons' wives, not to qualify for a personal name by virtue of not rising above her simple role as a wife. At the beginning of this narrative, Noah's wife *appears* to disappear, despite the fact that here, too, the passage begins with the kind of procession in which she had appeared earlier. However, Noah's wife has become *noticeable* for being described in a language of indirection that has so confounded, abused, and exposed her person that she cannot even have a culturally coherent anonymous name as the woman of Noah. She appears more visibly for having suddenly been covered up. Coincidentally, her putative disappearance occurs when the narrator mentions in the

procession, in a fashion that appears intrusive, that Ham is the father of Canaan. His appearance in the procession, which displaces Noah's wife and the sons' wives, coincides with Noah planting a vineyard, becoming drunk and then being exposed by Ham after Noah uncovers himself. The phrase alluding to Canaan spells trouble, and constitutes a loud hint that we are about to hear an etiological myth about the birth of the fallen Canaan and his disabling difference from his uncles Shem and Japheth. The pericope establishes a number of new cultural beginnings and practices: (a) viticulture; (b) drunkenness; (c) heterosexual maternal incest; (d) the Canaanites as a morally disqualified and anti-paternal people; and (e) slavery.

The first time the narrator mentions Noah's sons is in connection with naming the descendants of Noah, a "righteous man", "blameless in his age" who "walked with God" (Gen 6:9). These descriptions do *not* apply to Noah's three sons, however, which means that one or more of his sons might conceivably be involved in the "lawlessness" (Gen 6:11) which causes God to "put an end to all flesh" (Gen 6:13). God then promises not to destroy the world again, having learned the lesson that "the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). God blesses Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and, significantly, enjoins them to "be fertile and increase, and fill the earth" (Gen 9:1)⁹. This twice repeated commandment makes sense in this context, given that the Deluge has created an unpopulated, desolate earth. However, this commandment to be fruitful, designed by God to reverse the effects of the punishment He has inflicted by destroying all life on earth – save the remnant of Noah and his family – produces continuous sexual transgression. Moral corruption, analogous to that witnessed before the Deluge recurs, as when the "divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them" (Gen 6:2)¹⁰. The enjoined blessing to be fruitful and increase does not include a prohibition against *incest* but strongly implies a prohibition against *homosexuality* inasmuch as homosexual sex violates the commandment to produce offspring with whom to repopulate the earth. It makes far more sense to argue that Ham, when having incestuous sex with his mother, can claim to himself that he is obeying God's repeated commandment and displacing the father who has proven impotent¹¹.

Although already an elderly man (600 years old) when ordered by God to build the ark, Noah, perennially obedient to God, must find the means to fulfill the commandment of God to be fruitful and multiply. The reason behind the otherwise perplexing fact that Noah, a righteous man, is the first to plant a vineyard and become drunk lies here. In comically absurd and pious terms, Noah attempts to spark his failing virile powers by using wine to inflame his desires, and thus produce offspring¹². This is a well attested use of wine in the Hebrew Bible, as are connections between drunkenness and “uncovering nakedness”¹³. The narrative that follows proceeds by the following steps and interpreted events: (a) Noah gets naked or “uncovers himself” in his tent, preparing to have inebriated sex with his wife. Given his drunkenness and his great age, he is seen as humiliating and shaming himself in the very act of attempting to obey God’s injunction; (b) Noah passes out instead of having sex with his wife, so that the wine induces nothing but impotence and unconsciousness; (c) Ham sees his father’s nakedness. He sees that Noah has passed out, is impotent and drunk, and that his mother lies exposed. Ham replaces the once fecund patriarch Noah by having sex with Noah’s wife; (d) He tells, or, rather, brags to his brothers outside, telling them the entire story, including the fact that he has risen from being the youngest son to the patriarch, as Noah’s unspeakable wife is now his consort. The brothers will owe him respect and obedience and Noah will lose his social identity as a patriarch; (e) The brothers *hear* these damning words but *deny* their truth by refusing, literally, to look at the evidence. They turn backwards and cover their father with a garment, carefully avoiding looking at Noah or Noah’s wife. They cover Noah’s humiliating exposure, and the unspeakable sin that Ham has committed of having sex with his mother using the commandment to be fruitful and multiply (which Noah cannot obey) opportunistically to gain heterosexual and patriarchal power and privilege; (f) Noah awakens and knows all the things that Ham, his youngest son, has done to him. He cannot curse Ham, as God has blessed Ham and, far more important, Ham has become a patriarch by having sex with Noah’s wife. Noah cannot curse an equal as curses are for subordinates. Noah’s curse therefore falls on Canaan, who is innocent, but who might be the offspring of Ham and Noah’s wife¹⁴. Noah reasserts his shattered authority – and shames the shamer – by imposing permanent servitude on Canaan and his offspring.

Noah's wife, whose importance as the second "mother of all the living", literally cannot be named, but the very pains that the story takes to remove evidence of her existence proves her importance. The phrase "the nakedness of the father" is a term of art that means the woman of the father, but that disguises the name of the woman because references to "nakedness" of relatives have strong sexual and, normatively, incestuous connotations¹⁵. Lev 18:7a reads:

"Your father's nakedness, that is, the nakedness of your mother, you shall not uncover; she is your mother – you shall not uncover her nakedness".

If another term for heterosexual maternal incest is "your father's nakedness" or "the nakedness of your father", the reader can see how the very enormity of this crime is being *exposed* through being *covered up*, just as Noah's wife is both anonymous and invisible and yet highly present. Ham *replaces* his father and has sex with his mother. When Noah awakens from his wine, he "knew" (KJV Gen 9:24) or "learned" (JPS) what Ham has done to him. The horrible, unspeakable nature of this offense, and the manner in which it strips Noah of his social role as the patriarch explains, like other theories do not, the severity of Noah's curse against Canaan¹⁶.

Just as with the indirect language for incest in Leviticus, the narrative also "covers" Noah by blushinglly avoiding the topic of incest by destroying direct evidence of the presence of Noah's wife. While this might seem like a pious act of recovering respect for the uncovered father, the narrator uses the gesture of Shem and Japheth to "cover over" the direct tracks of maternal incest. If the entire narrative simultaneously acknowledges but also disguises the transgression of the incest prohibition, as God commands humankind to be fruitful and multiply, the women in these stories bear the consequences of how Genesis decides to narrate the story of creation and earlier humankind before God calls Abraham and Sarah to Canaan, renamed the Promised Land. Those who bless Abraham and Sarah will be blessed, and they are called to re-populate the land of Canaan and displace the Canaanites, who have merited this displacement, and the lowly social status such displacement entails, by the curse described in Gen 9.

With the exception of Eve, who Adam names “mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20), and Adah and Zillah, the wives of Lamech who are named because he addresses both of them directly in a manner of bragging about his violent greediness as a polygamist, the women in Genesis before the advent of Sarah remain unnamed. The “daughters of men” are not given proper names because they are limited to their roles as daughters and, as well, are bound up in sexual transgression so severe that it causes God to destroy the world¹⁷. The wife of Noah remains perilously vulnerable to incestuous sexual transgressions that preclude her from acquiring a name, participating in inter-generational historical continuity, and from the specific and *limited* roles as proper wife and mother. Hence, it is the children of the *named* mother – whose naming signifies her non-involvement with incestuous “confusion” and significant action(s) – who the deity names – and chooses – as the people who, unlike the offspring of Ham, belong rightly to Canaan. On the one hand, God makes adherence to the incest prohibition an *implicit* test of what defines the “righteous man... blameless in his generation” (Gen 6:9). On the other hand, the deity colludes with the Gen 9:20–29 narrative, not only aiding in Noah’s covering but also in the manner in which the earlier narratives of Genesis “cover” incest by using substitute language, choosing broadly negative or ambiguous terms, and stripping women of social identity outside calling them the “wife” of one of the male characters. The notorious ambiguity of the narrative in Gen 9:20–29 therefore serves several purposes. It establishes instinctual adherence to the incest prohibition as the test for deciding whether the Israelites or the Canaanites should inherit the land. It obscures the importance of the incest taboo in explaining and motivating the action that results in cursing the Canaanites. It erases the names of women to gloss over inconvenient violations or questions about the incest taboo, while making their bodies the grounds for deciding what brothers will or will not be promised the land.

The narrator might call Noah “blameless in his age” (Gen 6:9) because of his obedience to God and respect for the sexual boundaries that enable coherent kinship naming. When Noah and his family re-enter a desolate world, however, this fact alone calls into question how there will be a coherent transmission of the Noahide Covenant from father to son¹⁸. While God has established this covenant, it is up to human beings to perpetuate it down the gen-

erations. As Leon Kass notes, the task of cultural transmission requires “the will and dedication to transmit those insights and arrangements from one generation to the next” as “tradition requires fathers *who are able* to hand down and sons *willing* to receive a ‘law abiding and righteous way of life’ through ‘paternal authority and filial piety’” (italics mine). Incest undoes this work of patriarchal transmission. The story in Gen 5:32 about the “sons of God and the beautiful daughters of man” reverberates in Gen 9:18–27 ties together the two stories, enhances their aesthetic power and irony, and illustrate the undoing of orderly transmission by beings who overstep boundaries. Seeing the maternal incest in Gen 9:22 unites the stories around the themes of overreaching and illicit sexual intercourse, and also alerts the reader to the incestuous overtones of referring to the mortals as the *daughters* (as opposed to wives or mothers) of men.

Ham has maternal incestuous sex with his father Noah’s *therefore* unnamed wife. This act, which disrupts the orderly transmission of tradition down the generations, elucidates the grave nature of the offense and the severity of the corresponding penalty even as it overturns all stable intergenerational family relationships. Ham’s act remands Noah, once his father, into social death, since Ham has occupied the exclusive place of his erstwhile father Noah. Noah’s wife, Ham’s mother, becomes Ham’s unnamable and unspeakable consort, even as she changes generations, moving from the differentiated generation of the mother into the parallel generation of Ham’s wife (or woman). Ham displaces his father and becomes the symbolic father to his brothers Shem and Japheth, having acquired, although he is the last born son, the authority of the patriarchal father through his procreative incestuous act. The brothers’ acts of discreetly covering and Noah’s realization deliberately play on the broader meanings of the phrase “see” the nakedness of “their father”. In this case, that nakedness refers to his wife and the text must underscore this shamed modesty by “covering” the name of their exposed mother. Noah and Ham see and Seth and Japheth hear about their seeing of the exposed and violated wife. Whereas Ham relishes transgressing against and humiliating his family members, his brothers demur from exposing the nakedness either of their mother or of their father. God had forsworn destruction of the physical world in the Noahide Covenant but Ham visits annihilating destruction on

the human cultural world. The penalty for having decimated proper place in familial relations is to permanently lose social place and prestige¹⁹.

II.

The view that Ham committed the offense of voyeurism, and that he did nothing more than see the literal bodily nakedness of his father, has long enjoyed favor. The voyeurism reading actually constitutes a non-explanation, however, inasmuch as it fails to elucidate any of the most important meanings in the story: the enormity of the crime, the gravity of the curse, and the shift from Ham the father to Canaan the son. Further, this interpretation requires that the reader credit a taboo against the sight of a naked father to which neither the Bible nor ancient Near Eastern literature attest. While critics have attempted to explain seemingly awkward passages in Torah as mysterious or arbitrary, the work of scholars like Robert Alter and Michael Fishbane has underscored the artistic and intellectual trenchancy of the Hebrew Bible, and made such arguments increasingly dubious. If the Pentateuch seldom stoops to carelessness or arbitrariness, and delights in complex intertextual echoes, then critics are responsible for uncovering legitimate coherence.

In contrast, the traditional rabbinic view that Ham castrated Noah arose in an effort to address the insufficiencies of the voyeuristic interpretation. This view, developed at length in *Sanhedrin*, shows that in this instance the rabbis were amending ancient exegetical tradition. Coming to terms with the gravity of the curse pronounced on Canaan, they concluded that Ham *must* have castrated his father Noah. In support of this view, ancient Near Eastern literature, if not the Bible, attests to a son castrating his father. According to this view, Ham commits his crime to usurp the power of his father and Noah curses Canaan because Ham has deprived Noah of a fourth son. The problem is that there is no textual evidence that Ham castrates his father.

The contemporary resurgence of the interpretation that Ham sexually abuses his father, particularly given the theological, ethical, and methodological differences among scholars, seems surprising. They are united in the conviction that the narrative points to something far graver than voyeurism, but recognize the lack of textual evidence for castration. As the Bible states that Noah woke and realizes what Ham had “done” to him means that something

more than voyeurism and more textually attested than castration seems preferable. However, this interpretation has signal difficulties. The phrase that the Bible uses to describe the transgression of Ham is “to see the nakedness of the father”. This is an idiom for sexual intercourse, as Lev 20:17 equates the idiomatic expressions “to see nakedness” and “to uncover nakedness”. Elsewhere in Leviticus “to uncover nakedness” is the most common expression for sexual intercourse – especially incestuous intercourse – in the Holiness Code. Therefore, when speaking of incest, Leviticus states, “None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness” (Lev 18:6). Several scholars have noted the integral links between Gen 9:18–27 and Leviticus 18 and 20. More than prescribing the same penalties, both use the same word for transgressive sex that shames and humiliates; “uncovering the nakedness of the father” and to “see nakedness”. Further, Leviticus 18 opens with a warning not to imitate the practices of the inhabitants of Canaan or Egypt, the two most prominent descendants of Ham (v. 3 cf. Gen 10:6). Ezekiel repeatedly uses this idiom when describing sexual license, violence, and immorality, moreover. He addresses the harlot who “offered your nakedness to your lovers of harlotry” (Ezek 16:36–37); and speaks of the bloodthirsty men who have “uncovered their father’s nakedness” (Ezek 22:10)²⁰. Thus, the Bible attests that when Ham sees his father’s nakedness the text implies far more than literal “sight”. This view has the heuristic value of clarifying the putative between Gen 9:18–27, 6:5–15, 19 and Lev 19–20.

When this narrative is seen as describing parent-child incest, links with other narratives in Genesis and Torah become apparent. For instance, several critics have noted the links between Gen 9:20–27 and the earlier story about the intercourse of the “sons of God” with the beautiful “daughters of men”. Indeed, the first story *introduces* and the second *concludes* the flood narrative. Gen 5:32 reverberates in Gen 9:28–29, and enhances the aesthetic power and irony of both. Seeing incest in Gen 9:22 unites the stories around the theme of illicit sexual intercourse and awakens us to the incestuous overtones of referring to the mortals as the “daughters of men”, rather than wives and mothers. The links between Gen 9:20–27 and Lev 18 and 20 are evident. More than prescribing the same penalties, both use the same word for transgressive sex, uncovering the “nakedness of the father” and “to see nakedness”. Further,

Lev 18 opens with a warning not to imitate the practices of the inhabitants of Canaan or Egypt, the two most prominent descendants of Ham (v. 3, cf. Gen 10:6). Indeed, both accounts of incest in Genesis involve drunkenness, first that of Noah and then that of Lot. These stories share the role of wine, the transgression of sons or daughters against parents, and the concern for survival and future generations. While some scholars have used verses in Deuteronomy to argue that the sin in the Noah story involves paternal incest, they do not succeed in explaining what motivates this pernicious violence against his father. Some contend that Ham hopes to become the head by humiliating his father and displacing his brothers, but the instruments he chooses are ineffectual unless he has presumed to have sex with his father's wife. Ham's brutal disrespect in all likelihood reminded the Israelites of their humiliation under slavery and therefore Ham became to them the symbol of Canaanite and Egyptian sin. Ham has a wife, and he hungers not for homosexual sex but rather for heterosexual, procreative *power* over his entire family. If the stories in Genesis in some measure reprise the story of the hardships of Israel under Egyptian bondage, then it makes sense for the text to distinguish between sons who "saw" and "drew attention" to the powerless servility of their fathers and those who "covered" the "nakedness" of their fathers. Shem and Japheth do not use this as an occasion to further humiliate and degrade Noah. Rather, the narrator needs an etiological story to explain the exclusion of the Canaanites, and yet their presence in the Promised Land.

Interpreting the sin of Ham as paternal incest is supported by one idiomatic meaning of the phrase "to see the nakedness of the father" and the erotic undertones of the text. This view has the heuristic value of clarifying intertextual relations between Gen 18–27, 6:5–15, 19, Lev 19–20, and Deut 23:1 and 27:20. However, this theory provides a weak motive for Ham's egregious crime and fails completely to explain the rationale for the cursing of Canaan rather than Ham. Unfortunately, the substantive argument scholars have marshaled to support the paternal incest interpretation can neither make sense of the curse nor make *as much* sense of all the preceding passages as does maternal incest.

First, the idiomatic meaning and referent of the phrase "to see the father's nakedness" is to see/have intercourse with the father's wife. Given that

Noah's wife, the mother of the second creation who should, more logically, bear a personal name and identity comporting with her unique, important role, it makes even more sense to see her as deliberately hidden to disguise the nature of the crime against her, her husband, and the status of their capacity to "be fruitful and multiply". Those who support the paternal incest theory correctly equate "see the father's nakedness" with "to uncover nakedness" (Lev 20:17), understanding both as euphemisms for sexual intercourse with the father. However, in *all* the relevant texts (including those in Deut 23:1 and 27:20)²¹ "to uncover nakedness" is associated with heterosexual acts and "the nakedness of the father" is the nakedness, at last, of the mother. Because wives then belonged to their husbands, their nakedness became a property associated with their husbands, in relation to whom "nakedness" assumed its relevant meanings. The Hebrew Bible never associates homosexual relations with "to uncover nakedness" or "nakedness of the father". Can we therefore conclude that the Hebrew Bible has no concept of paternal homosexual incest? While this conclusion does not necessarily follow logically, it does so conceptually and helps the reader make sense of how the biblical world constructed the domain of gender and sexuality.

Gen 19:1–14 patently describes attempted male homosexual rape, but also paints this symbolically charged act as meaning to humiliate, ridicule, debase, and forbid hospitality. However, how is the reader to understand the moment when Lot, desperate to defend his self-definition as an adult man who can offer hospitality and protect other men from public degradation, at least under his roof, offers instead his virgin daughters to the men to "do to them what you please" (Gen 19:8)? Perhaps Lot knows that the insular Sodomites will refuse his offer because his daughters are half Sodomite. That possibility does not remove the question of the relationship Lot – and his nameless wife – bear to their daughters. Lot's initial story appears to reprise the earlier story in which the fathers permit intercourse between the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" which causes God to "blot out from the earth the men whom I created" (Gen 6:7), just as God can be said to "blot out" Sodom and Gomorrah.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been seen as chiasmic with the story of Noah and his sons according to the paternal incest interpretation. Ac-

According to this interpretation, the tribes of the Canaanites (here the sodomites) threaten to rape a Hebrew patriarch, Lot, just as Ham had (or, according to some, attempted) to commit homosexual incest on his father Noah. In the one (Gen 19:1–14), God obliterates a city because of its wickedness; in the story of Noah, the world had just been destroyed for an analogous act of wickedness: sex between angelic beings and human beings.

However, the analogies, which seem primarily to reprise Gen 6:1–7, are dwarfed by those between Gen 9:18–27 and Gen 19:30–38, which are chiasmic, and which provide additional evidence that Ham commits heterosexual maternal incest against his consort; formally Noah's wife. Both Noah's family and Lot and his two daughters find themselves in a depopulated world as the result of judgments God makes on wicked people: in Gen 6 on mankind in general and in Gen 19 on Canaanite tribes who are to be displaced before Abraham. There is wine in both episodes: the wine Noah drinks to become amorous, and the wine the two daughters of Lot make their father drink to become inebriated, so that "he did not know when she lay down or when she rose" (Gen 19:33). Both sets of children commit sexual acts upon their inebriated parents (Lot's daughters have sex with their father, and Ham with his mother) in an effort to, as the older daughter says to the younger, "preserve life" (Gen 19:32). Ham *also* wants to obey the commandment to be fruitful and multiply; but, more accurately, he wishes to make opportunistic use of this injunction so that he can become the new patriarch by displacing his father Noah and demoting his brothers. In both cases, the incestuous unions result in offspring who are the determined enemies of Israel: Ham's son, Canaan, and Lot's daughters' sons, Moab and Ben-ammi²².

Perceiving maternal incest as at the heart of the narrative of Noah and his sons makes more sense of the language, the unlikely naming (or unnamings) of a significant character, the idioms of the Hebrew Bible, the severe curse Noah proclaims over Canaan, Near East cultural referents, and related narratives in the Hebrew Bible. However, what are the ethical implications of interpreting the sin of Ham as maternal incest? Noah becomes drunk and uncovers himself within his tent. He falls asleep of inebriation, unable to perform. Ham sees the humiliating unconsciousness of his father and takes this opportunity to displace the status and identity of his mother, father, and brothers by engaging

in incestuous relations with his mother that likely produce offspring – Canaan. Therefore, the wife of his father – who is the nakedness of his father – becomes his wife/woman, and this state of affairs makes the proper name she merits bearing unfeasible and risible. After copulating with his mother, he leaves the tent and brags to his brothers, inviting them to bear witness to the event that has so increased his power and authority. Shem and Japheth resist by refusing to look at the evidence of this calamity, thus shielding their father from exposure by covering the name of his wife under the “skirts” of the idiom “uncover the nakedness of the father”. They cover up the fact of Ham’s transgression and its aftermath, leaving the reader with surmises and a challenging puzzle. Noah curses Canaan, the product of the union or, alternately, the person who he can curse as the subordinate of Ham. He reduces Canaan to the status of the servants of servants, and inflicts the curse of permanent slavery on Canaan.

The Hebrew Bible is clear on this matter: human beings must wait their proper time and place to become fathers and mothers, or brothers and daughters. These roles cannot overlap without jeopardizing human cultural coherence and continuity – the transmission of knowledge from the father to the son on which Torah depends for forging an Israelite identity and nation. In this important sense, the incoherence traditionally associated with the story of Noah and Ham results from its thematic topic: the confusion born of overturning of family names and relationships, with consequent overturning of temporal generations of human beings. If we consider the implications of Ham’s procreative union with his mother, we can appreciate the enormity of this crime – so much more severe and power-grabbing than sex with his father – the severity of Noah’s curse on Canaan, and why Noah curses Canaan rather than Ham, who committed the crime. Ham would consign his father Noah to social death, as he can no longer claim the Name of the Father any more than his wife can claim the Name of the Mother. Hence, Noah disappears and Noah’s wife becomes Ham’s baby-making consort. In this position, this no-name wife does not, unlike Sarah, have the capacity or right to nurture or plea for her sons. If her former husband is consigned to social death, then she is consigned to social illegibility – bearing the mark of something that refuses to be read but insists upon itself through the very strength of its anonymity.

Given the fact that Shem and Japheth must submit to Ham, it perhaps makes sense that the sons leave the desolate scene to found a Babylonian city where they can make their unmothered and unfathered name “great”. This quest ends in scattering and babbling of the languages of humankind. With the advent of Abraham, and the advent of Sarah comes the recognition that the coherent passing down of patriarchal tradition and authority depends on upholding the maternal incest prohibition and, thereby, guaranteeing the place and the Name of the Mother.

¹ Robinson M. *Housekeeping*. New York, 1981. P. 148.

² Sanhedrin 70a. Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud.

³ Gen 9:22. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Hebrew Bible are from the TANAKH: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation. 2nd edition: Philadelphia, 1999/5759.

⁴ See Phillips A. *Uncovering the Father's Skirt / Vetus Testamentum*. 1980. Vol XXX. № 1. Pp. 38–43. Phillips distinguishes between laws in Deut 23:1 and 27:20 that he contends pertain to heterosexual maternal incest and heterosexual paternal incest, respectively. Alluding to the crime Ham commits against Noah, Phillips states that “we should perhaps understand this incident as more than an immodest looking at his drunken father but rather his actual seduction [of Noah] while unconscious... an act so abhorrent that the author is unwilling to point it out” (P. 41). See also Rashkow I. N. *Daddy Dearest and the “Invisible Spirit of Wine” In Genesis: The Feminist Companion to the Bible / Ed. A. Brenner*. Sheffield, 1998. Pp. 82–107. Unlike Phillips, Rashkow uses psychoanalytic criticism to assert that Noah is “fantasizing about homosexual activity or, possibly, even actually initiating such a liaison with his son Ham” (P. 82). Furthermore, as against the rabbis in Sanhedrin 70a, who thought that Ham had castrated his father, Rashkow notes that “there are many myths in which the symbolic castration of the son by the father is an incestuous homosexual relationship” (P. 86).

⁵ Indeed, the impulse to name her has been so strong that the rabbis gave Noah's wife the mid-rashic name, Naamah.

⁶ For an informative discussion of the varied contexts and meanings of anonymity of many biblical characters see Reinhartz A. “Why Ask My Name?” *Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative*. New York, 1998.

⁷ King James Version, Gen 9:18–27. Subsequent references to this edition will be noted parenthetically as KJV.

⁸ As Noah and his household disembark following the Deluge, the deity gives an order about how they should proceed out of the ark: “Come out of the ark, together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives” (Gen 8:15–16) However, Noah does not quite obey the deity's

instructions about how to leave the ark; rather, he comes out “together with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives” (Gen 8:18). Noah’s demotion of his wife to second place in the procession prefigures her diminishment if not actual disappearance. Leon Krauss remarks, “Noah, a new man rescued from the Heroic Age, nevertheless apparently still holds to a heroic model of family structure: it is only men who count” (Krauss L. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. New York, 2003. P. 202).

⁹ In Gen 9:7, this command is repeated in slightly different linguistic form as, “Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase on it”.

¹⁰ In this incidence, the offense is sex, forcible and indiscriminate in nature, between immortal beings (angels) and mortal women, who produce as offspring, “the heroes of old, the men of renown” (Gen 6:4). Another offense implied in this passage is the removal of patriarchal control over marriage, as well as the responsibility to protect daughters from improper sexual advances. In Westerman C. *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, 1974, Westerman comments that “behind the union of the sons of God and daughters of men there is the instinct to prolong and secure life... a person is thrown back within the bounds that he overstepped and one’s lifespan is limited” (P. 376). A similar state of affairs holds true for Ham who, wishing not to be constrained by the limits of ordinary mortals, in having sex with his mother intends to overstep the boundaries of generations.

¹¹ The Hebrew Bible provides abundant evidence that having sex with one’s father’s wife or wives did, and was intended to, usurp the father’s patriarch place and privilege. Reuben has sexual relations with Jacob’s concubine Bildad; David acquires Saul’s concubines; Adonijah attempts to acquire David’s wife Abishag, and Absalom has sex with David’s harem of wives. Ancient Near Eastern literature abounds with this theme. For instance, in a Sumerian creation myth, the wind god Elil, separates his father, the sky god An, from his mother, eventually replacing his father as the head of the Sumerian pantheon.

¹² Concurrently, Kitawada and Quinn note that “Noah was righteous but very old. The wine was his way to rekindle diminished sexual desires” (Kitawada I. M., Quinn A. *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1–11*. San Francisco, 1985. P. 102). In addition, H. Hirsch Cohen also remarks that “[Noah’s] intoxication did not stem from any deficiency of character but from his wholehearted attempt to execute the command he received from God upon disembarking from the ark” (Cohen H. H. *The Drunkenness of Noah*. Tuscaloosa, 1984. P. 7).

¹³ The images of wine and the vineyard symbolize sexual potency in Song of Songs, which construes the vineyard as an ideal place to make love, where drinking wine functions as a prelude to sexual intercourse. Moreover, in 2 Sam 11:13 King David discovers, to his chagrin, that Uriah the Hittite refuses to go home after David has made him get drunk, in order to make love with his wife (and therefore regard himself as the father of the child David has begotten with Bathsheba). However, Uriah, rather than dispensing with his scruples, merely falls asleep, just as Noah does after he drinks wine to the point of drunkenness. Habakkuk rails, “Ah, you who make others to drink to intoxication as you pour out your wrath, in order to gaze upon their

nakedness" (Hab 2:15). Lamentations exclaims, "Rejoice and exult, Fair Edom, Who dwell in the land of Uz! To you, too, the cup shall pass, you shall get drunk and expose your nakedness" (Lam 4:21). See also Psalms 80:8–16, Isa 5:1–7 and 27:2–6, and Ezek 19:10–14 for wine as a symbol of fertility and life.

¹⁴ Kitawada and Quinn assert that "Canaan would be cursed as the product of illicit sexual intercourse by Ham... If Canaan is the product of illicit intercourse by Ham, when and with whom did it occur? One answer suggests itself. Ham commits incest with his mother after his father is rendered incapacitated by drink (and after Noah arouses the mother but proves incapable of satisfying her)" (Kitawada I. M., Quinn A. *Before Abraham Was*. P. 103).

¹⁵ Deuteronomy articulates the son-mother incest prohibition in terms of the father's garment. "No man shall marry his father's former wife, so as to remove his father's garment" (Deut 23:1) and, more important, "Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife, for he has removed his father's garment" (Deut 27:20).

¹⁶ In Donald E. Gowan argues, like others, that the mismatch between voyeurism and a curse of slavery means that the text is fragmentary. "Since the movement from seeing one's father's nakedness to the curse of slavery does not seem to involve any natural cause-effect relationship, it seems more likely that an early story about the disruption of normal family relationships, in which Ham was probably the subject throughout, was later modified by the introduction of Canaan" (Gowan D. E. *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1–11*, Wm. B. Michigan, 1988. P. 107). With a text of such literary greatness as the Hebrew Bible, when something seems "amiss", it is likely in the eye of the beholder rather than in the text.

¹⁷ A similar state of affairs obtains for the wife Cain acquires in the land of Nod.

¹⁸ The Babylonian Talmud states that "the descendants of Noah were commanded with seven precepts: to establish laws, (and the prohibitions thereof) blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, theft, and eating the blood of a living animal (Sanhedrin 56a).

¹⁹ Umberto Cassuto notes that Shem and Japheth intuitively understand that, were they to see with their own eyes their father's nakedness, their family order would be permanently altered (Cassuto U. *A Commentary on the Book Genesis, Pt. II: From Noah to Abraham*. Jerusalem, 1974. P. 209).

²⁰ See also Ezek 23:10, 18, and 29.

²¹ It is particularly important to note the specific language and referents of Deut 27:20a. "Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife, for he has removed his father's garment". Noah precisely curses Canaan, whose father Ham has had sex with Noah's wife.

²² If there is narrative prolepsis and telescoping in the narrative of Noah and his sons, then it is likely that when Noah wakes and "sees" (or knows or realizes) what Ham has done to him he is referring specifically to Canaan, the proof of the fecund union between Noah's wife and Ham.

Abstract

The terse story of Noah and Ham has puzzled scholars since antiquity. While most critics have argued that castration, homosexual paternal incest, or voyeurism explain why Noah pronounces the severe curse of permanent servitude on Ham's son, Canaan, this article shows that the preponderance of evidence makes clear that Ham's offense is heterosexual maternal incest. Ham has sex with his mother, Noah's wife, after Noah loses consciousness from wine. Ham brags about what he has done to his brothers, because he has displaced his father, become the patriarch, and, ironically, fulfilled the injunction to "be fruitful and multiply". Canaan is cursed because he is the product of this illicit union. Noah's wife, who should have an individual name and identity that comports with her stature as the second mother of creation, is buried under indirect language of "the nakedness of the father" that at once disguises and draws attention to her unspeakable importance in this story.