

Episode 223

Speaker 2

Welcome to the God Questions podcast. We're continuing our Difficult Passages of the Bible series, and today is definitely an interesting one. I much appreciate having Jeff and Kevin with me today because this is one I think I know what it means, but there's enough kind of mystery around it, enough alternate interpretations that what exactly is happening here isn't maybe as clear as some would make it out to be, but I think there's some important lessons to learn through this one just as all the others.

Shea Houdmann

So today, Jeff, Kevin, and I are going to be discussing Noah's curse on Canaan in Genesis chapter 9. Let me go ahead and read the passage for you. I'll be reading Genesis 9, verses 20-27. It reads, Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders. Then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked. When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. He also said, Praise to the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem! May God extend Japheth's territory and Japheth live in the tents of Shem! And may Canaan be the slave of Japheth. So Jeff, what in the world is going on in this passage?

Jeff Laird

That's not only a really good question, but it might be one that we're never going to get a perfectly straight answer to. I know everybody today is really into true crime and things like that, where we have every single little detail and all the nuances. But to make a parallel to that, this would be like seeing a newspaper article that said that so-and-so went into his neighbor's house and killed his neighbor. And that's it. And then on the basis of that, we're trying to figure out, okay, did he kick the door in? Did he sneak in? Was he using a firearm or was it something that was deliberate or was it a crime of passion? Was it a male or female? There's all these things that we don't know that could be part of the description. We just don't really know. And we're trying to piece together what it could mean and what it couldn't mean. And this is one of those.

Jeff Laird

So there's questions about what exactly it is that happened. Most Bible versions use the phrase uncovered nakedness in reference to this. And usually in scripture, it's always a reference to something that's inappropriate. Very often it refers to something that's sexual, but not necessarily. So we don't know exactly what was happening in this case. It might be that Noah was doing something inappropriate and his son saw him. It may have been that he literally just got drunk and wasn't covered when he was there. We don't know what Ham supposedly did or didn't do. We don't know if he went in and did something to make it worse. There's suggestions that he may have done something really worse. Possibility is that maybe he just saw it and was indifferent, didn't do anything. Maybe when he told his brothers, he was laughing about it.

Jeff Laird

All of these are different possibilities for exactly what happened and how. Some of those make more sense than others. We see that Noah's response seems to be pretty strong and that suggests that this was probably something not quite superficial, but there's a lot of different ways to interpret what's going on here.

Jeff Laird

Personally, I'm inclined to think that some of the vagueness is helpful for us. I think there's a lot of times in scripture where God leaves things vague deliberately to make sure that we understand that this is about a broader concept. So we don't get hyper-focused just on those details. We learn the big lesson and we don't get caught up in saying, Yeah, well, I'm different because I'm not doing this particular unique nuanced thing that happened there. Some of the options are more interesting than others. Some of them are more controversial than others. Not many of them are very comfortable, but there's a lot of different ways that you can interpret this.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, I think the strength of Noah's curse against Canaan really does imply that the sin that was committed was something rather horrible. It probably wasn't just looking at Noah's nakedness. In fact, the scripture says that Noah understood what his youngest son had done to him. There was some type of an action there that probably was more than just observing. But the theories abound as to exactly what this act was.

Kevin Stone

One of the theories is that Canaan was with him and they both saw Noah in his degraded state. And they went out, they told Shem and Japheth, and they did so mockingly. They were disgracing Noah with the tail-bearing and all of

that gossip. The salacious news was something that they relished. And so that was the sin.

Kevin Stone

There's also a theory, though, that Canaan is actually the youngest son that is mentioned in verse 24 of Genesis 9. It would look like Noah had three sons. And when they're listed in scripture, it's always Shem, Ham, and Japheth. So it looks like Ham is actually the middle son. And so this particular theory says that Canaan would be considered the youngest son that is mentioned here in verses 24 and 25. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, Cursed be Canaan. And so how do we get Canaan to be the youngest son of Noah? Well, the Hebrew literally says, the son, the little one. So the little son, the little one of Noah. And so according to this theory, Canaan was the youngest son of Ham and also the youngest person in the whole family, all of Noah's family, that Canaan is the youngest one.

Kevin Stone

And we also have the fact that sometimes in scripture, and at least twice more in the book of Genesis, we have grandsons that are referred to as sons. In Genesis 29, Laban is called the son of Nahor, but we know that he was actually the grandson. But son of works as well. It's just how the expression was used sometimes. And also Genesis 31, where Laban is saying goodbye to his sons and daughters. We know he had two daughters, Leah and Rachel, but then who are his sons? Well, that would be his grandsons. But in that passage, they're just called his sons. So Canaan, the grandson of Noah, and the youngest one in the family is just called the youngest son or the little son of Noah. And he did something to Noah, and Noah woke up from his drunken stupor and said, Cursed be Canaan. That is one of the theories out there, one of the many.

Kevin Stone

There is also the theory that Ham had homosexual relations with Noah. There's a theory that he castrated his father and thus prevented Noah from ever having a fourth son. And so Noah then cursed Ham's fourth son, which was Canaan. That's one theory.

Kevin Stone

But there's another theory that says that Ham had sexual relations with Noah's wife. Presumably Ham's own mother, although the text doesn't say that. But to see a person's nakedness, Jeff mentioned this, to see a person's nakedness in Scripture or to uncover a person's nakedness in the Mosaic Law was a euphemism for having sex with that person. And further than that, to see a person's nakedness or to uncover the nakedness of one's father is a

euphemism for having sex with the father's wife. Leviticus 20 and verse 11 in the ESVs, If a man lies with his father's wife, he has uncovered his father's nakedness. Leviticus 18 verse 8, You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife, it is your father's nakedness. Very interesting. So if we are to apply that same phrasing to Genesis chapter 9, then to see his father's nakedness might be a euphemism for having sex with Noah's wife. Ham possibly did this.

Kevin Stone

We also know that having sex with a man's wife was a power play. So it could be that Ham was trying to usurp his father's patriarchal authority. We see this working out in the life of King David, where Absalom sleeps with all of David's concubines as a way to disgrace and usurp the authority from his father David. And then Adonijah later requests to be given David's wife Abishag. And Solomon sees that as the power play that it was and has Adonijah executed for that.

Kevin Stone

So according to this particular theory, what happens is this. Noah becomes drunk and uncovers himself. He disrobes in the tent. That's the literal reading in verse 21. It doesn't say his tent in the Hebrew, but just simply the tent might have been his wife's tent. So he gets drunk, he disrobes, he's going to make love to his wife, but he passes out and he cannot complete the deed. Ham comes into the tent and sees this situation and he has sex with his father's wife, presumably his own mother. He exits and he informs his brothers that he is now the patriarch. He has now usurped the authority in the family. He's the man. He has done this thing. And his brothers show great deference to their father. They refuse to even look at the scene. They go so far to say, we have nothing to do with this. We are not a part of this at all. We are not even going to look at this. And they cover up their father's shame.

Kevin Stone

And then later, Noah discovers what Ham had done because his wife is pregnant with Canaan. And Canaan is not Noah's son. It is Ham's son. So he curses the product of Ham's incest, namely Canaan. And then he blesses Shem and Japheth because of their good deed. So this would explain why Canaan is said to be Ham's son twice in the passage. Verse 18 and again in verse 22, the narrative twice says, Now Canaan was Ham's son. Then the narrative goes on to show how Canaan came to be Ham's son and gives us this sordid story. And it also would explain why similar wording is used in the Mosaic Law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about uncovering the nakedness of one's father or close relative.

Kevin Stone

And also it would kind of fit in with the two other instances in Genesis where we have evil acts leading to evil people. So in Genesis chapter 6, we have the sons of God that are cohabiting with the daughters of men. The result is a lot of evil in the world. And then Genesis 19, where we have the story of Lot and his daughters. That particular case of incest also led to the nations of Moab and Ammon. And here in Genesis 9, we have the incest leading to the nation of Canaan. And so in all of these cases, it results in enemies of God's people. And is this the true theory? I don't know. But I think it is one that is worth at least consideration.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, thank you for that excellent summary of the different views. Especially how thorough you were with that last one. I mean, I had read a little bit about it, but I hadn't put the whole picture of it together like that. No, that's fascinating. And for those who are listening, there are more out there. I mean, in Jewish apocryphal literature, there are all sorts of different sordid stories of what exactly went on in this passage here. And truly, for the longest time, I'd read this passage, I'd be like, okay, so Noah gets drunk, passes out, is laying in a tent naked. Ham walks by, sees it, goes and tells his brothers. He's probably joking about it. The two brothers walk in backwards, cover their father. Noah wakes up and curses his grandson. He's like, I don't understand it, but that seems to be, that's how I've always understood it.

Shea Houdmann

And that actually could be what's going on. But once you look into how some of these, this language is used elsewhere in scripture and how it fits the thing. And Kevin, even as you were talking, I was thinking, I wonder if there's a connection with Moab and Ammon in Genesis 19. And then you brought it up. So be interesting that three of Israel's main enemies in ancient times were the result of incestuous relationships with the early patriarchs. So it's a fascinating story.

Shea Houdmann

There's very likely, as you were saying, more going on here than just a really brief summary I just described of basically someone being naked and getting covered up. The strength of the curse, as both Jeff and Kevin alluded to, seems to indicate there's more to the story. What exactly the full story is, I don't know that we'll ever know. I don't know that we need to know other than the fact that we can see how this curse was played out in the history of the nation of Canaan and the Canaanites. To see that God follows through with his promises, God does not reward wickedness and obeying God's word and living lives and honoring your father in a proper way are very, very important to God.

Jeff Laird

Going back to this true crime thing that we said, if you were to read in the paper that it said a man came home, went to the house next door, killed his neighbor, it wouldn't make sense to read that and say, well, clearly the newspaper is telling me that the man did it for absolutely no reason and he did it with his bare hands because they didn't tell me a motive and they didn't tell me a weapon. You're looking at something similar here. No, we're not given the details, but this is a case where it does make sense for us to say it's almost obvious that there's something happening here that's not being fully explained. That might be deliberate. Moses might have been dancing around the exact issue for whatever reason. That's one of the reasons some people think that it could have been something really, really disturbing like what you were describing, Kevin. That's the reason why everything in here is so vague, meaning it's, look, something awful happened. All you really need to know is bad enough that this was the end result of it.

Jeff Laird

There's also other things that we look at in this that are curious, that are sometimes interesting to think about. One of them is what exactly happened with the drunkenness thing? It says that Noah began to be a, he planted a vineyard and then he got drunk. Why? And under what circumstances? I've heard explanations for that, everything from the idea that he was trying to erase the trauma of what had just happened during the flood. That was one option.

Jeff Laird

Another one that makes sense to me is that it's possible that that was the first time we know that somebody was really cultivating that much and it was the first time that he had that much wine on hand. Maybe he just wasn't used to that level of alcohol and he got himself in trouble with it, which would lean into the idea that instead of his son looking at him and saying, oh man, something's wrong, I need to help, that he went and made fun of him or laughed at him or took advantage of him and did something different. So it's still tons of different things to look at here.

Jeff Laird

Some of those are interesting to think about and I think they lead in good directions when we try to say, how do I fill in these details in ways that make sense? But then there's ways that people try to get into this that don't make sense. In other words, people take this and they want to take what's a curse on Canaan and turn it into a curse on Ham and then they want to start applying things like racial attitudes towards it. They try to say that this is somehow evidence that this entire class of people now has been cursed. We

want to be careful that when we take these details, we know that we don't really know them and we don't blow them completely out of proportion just because in theory we could fit them into the narrative.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly. I tasked Kevin not that long ago with rewriting our article on this topic because we kept getting questions about what you just alluded to, the whole racial component of this. I find it so interesting whether it's the mark on Cain in Genesis chapter 4 or the nation of Canaanites, which actually had no connection to Cain or to Canaan just because the words are the same. For a long time, this curse or the mark in Genesis 4 were somehow applied to the African race, to black people, indicating that they were the ones who were cursed. And this passage mentions cursed to be Canaan slaves. They'll be slaves to the descendants of Shem and the descendants of Japheth, which especially assuming we actually know who all the descendants of Shem and Japheth were, that may have played out historically speaking. But the Canaanites did not live in Africa. The Canaanites lived in the land of Canaan. They were in the land that in the time of Joshua the Israel conquered after the Exodus.

Shea Houdmann

And you know the whole of Genesis through Deuteronomy that Moses wrote, he wrote it during the time of the Exodus before they entered the Promised Land. So here in both with the, as Kevin mentioned, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and now also the Canaanites, Moses is describing their lineage, where they come from, describing their very questionable beginning, and writing Canaan the actual curse. And as they, here's one of the reasons why you are to enter the land and completely destroy these people. Because they are a cursed people. So how that all works out with what actually happened here in Genesis 9, don't entirely know, but whatever happened resulted in a curse on the entire lineage of Canaan, which was part of the explanation for conquering the land and getting all the Canaanites out of the land of Canaan, eventually the land of Israel.

Shea Houdmann

So there's a lot going on in this passage, but one thing we can be absolutely sure of, and let me say this so clearly, this has absolutely nothing to do with the trans-Atlantic slave trade of Africans. No connection at all. The Canaanites were not African. They were Middle Eastern. It's as simple as that. So this passage, as well as others, were used by some in the past to justify African slavery. It's completely, absolutely unbiblical.

Kevin Stone

Yes, Scripture tells us who the descendants of Canaan were. Genesis chapter 10, we have the Sidonians, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites, and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now by the time of Moses, Sodom and Gomorrah had already been taken care of by God, but there were still the Jebusites and the other Ites that were in Canaan. They were all Canaanites. They were all descendants of Canaan. So it was really important for Moses to relate this particular story in Noah's life because Moses was leading people to go and conquer all of these people. So they needed to know the curse. This was a cursed people that were living in Canaan at the time, and Moses was making sure they had the proper historical perspective on God's curse and how Israel was being used as God's instrument to implement the curse, which was eventually done under the leadership of Joshua.

Kevin Stone

And so, yes, it has nothing to do with racial stuff. It has nothing to do with slavery. It has to do with God's curse on a particular people, the Canaanites, at that particular time, and the reason for the curse is given there in Genesis chapter 9.

Jeff Laird

It's interesting or ironic that people who take that tact, that they think that this justifies race-based slavery, always refer to it as the curse of Ham, when it's not a curse on Ham, it's a curse on Canaan, which is much more specific. So even if you took the approach that said that African people are the descendants of Ham, sure, somehow, I guess, the way people move around, you're still only talking about a subset of that. So even its own logic falls apart.

Jeff Laird

But you're right, there's nothing in this that gives a legitimate connection to that. That's an example of people scratching and scrabbling and trying to dig something out of the text that they just got to find some way. And again, just to specify, we are not suggesting per se that any of these different theories that we're getting into, that they are either all true or one specific one must be the one. Some are more likely than others, some make sense more than others, but we don't really know exactly what happened. All we can really do is look at this and say, look, I can get the bigger picture. I can understand generally what God is trying to say here. The speculating about the details that's in there, interesting, may be helpful, but I don't want to go too far with it.

Jeff Laird

For example, this is one of those passages that's often used when people try to claim that alcohol is always a sin. Every bit of alcohol is always sinful because of what happened to Noah. Well, but we don't know exactly what happened. We get the very bare bones. He planted a vineyard, he got drunk.

There's a lot that goes on in between those two. So we really don't know precisely what led to that. We can't run to a conclusion that's that specific from something like this.

Jeff Laird

So this one's definitely it's weird, but I think the broad thing that we're supposed to get from this is that, like was said before, we're getting an understanding of where these cursed people came from, how they got their origins. That doesn't explain all the reasons that God wanted them to be taken care of when the promised land was being taken over. But it does give us the basis for that. And it does say something about the importance of how seriously God takes honoring family and lineage, things like that. So it's not that we can't learn anything from it whatsoever. We just want to be really careful that we don't try to apply this when we have so little to go on.

Shea Houdmann

Well said, Jeff. And this is like I let off with here. This is a passage that at face value a lot of people have interpreted, about a guy getting drunk, laying naked, one son didn't cover him, the other ones did. But could that be what's going on here? Sure. But based on how the word is used elsewhere in Scripture, as Kevin mentioned, sure seems like there's something more going on here.

Shea Houdmann

And even the strength of the curse that Noah utters seems to indicate there's more here than just someone seeing someone else naked. But what precisely that was, that's going beyond what is written. We can speculate, we can guess, we can see what makes sense. And I think Kevin's, not that that's Kevin's preferred view, but the view that Kevin outlined here, that sounds very plausible and it would make sense. It'd be consistent with what we see elsewhere in Scripture, but we're not saying that's for sure what happened. We're just saying something really bad appears to have happened in this passage. What that was, we don't know. But we can see the results. The Canaanites were a cursed people. That was part of the reason why God commanded the Israelites as they were conquering the land of Canaan to completely get those people out of the land. Have nothing to do with them. Do not intermarry with them. Do not mingle with them. Do not worship their gods. Get rid of them.

Shea Houdmann

As we see in Scripture, the Israelites obeyed partially, mostly, and as a result, they were led astray by the nations that were still inhabiting the land. I think the main point that we see here is that obey God's commands and that when

God commands us to do something, there is a reason for it, including the conquest of Canaan.

Kevin Stone

If I could just interject here to the mercy of God even in a cursed nation, because Rahab was a Canaanite. Rahab found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Rahab became part of God's people. Even though she was part of a cursed people, there's still mercy available. Mercy triumphs over judgment. We praise the Lord for the story of Rahab that goes along with this as well.

Jeff Laird

We also see Ruth. Ruth was from Moab. She was a Moabite. Another one of these stories that we have in here. There's connections there to show that when God pronounces these judgments, the judgment is not genetic per se. Yes, it comes through the culture, but it is not something that's literally tied to your DNA. There's still mercy and grace available.

Shea Houdmann

This has been our conversation on what's going on in Genesis 9 with Noah, Ham, and Canaan. I hope our conversation has been helpful to you. It's been helpful even for me just to go through this conversation again. I learned some things about some of the nuances, some of the different interpretations that are out there. Keep studying God's Word, look up this passage, read the commentaries, but focus on the main point. Don't spend so much time, I've got to figure out exactly what happened when Scripture actually doesn't give us all the details of what happened. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.