What Did Ham Do to Noah?

by

DAVID M. GOLDENBERG

The biblical story of Noah’s drunkenness and curse of Canaan (Gen 9:20-29) remains problematic. The three core difficulties are: why was Noah’s curse one of slavery; why was the curse pronounced against Canaan, when it was his father, Ham, who committed the crime against Noah; and what was it that Ham did to Noah? Even the discoveries of the Ugaritic myths have not much helped in solving these problems. The parallels to the story of the drunken El and his three sons, Thukamuna (ŋkmn), Shunama (šnm) and Haby (ḥby), may indicate a shared literary or other background at some point, but the parallels are too general to help us elucidate the Noah story in its particulars, or to shed light on the names of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet. Similarly unhelpful have been other efforts of explanation based


on Greek myths of a universal flood and the repopulation of the earth from Iapetus, one of the Titans.³

The rabbinic explanations of the story also present us with enigmatic elements. The Babylonian Talmud (San 70a) records a debate between two third-century sages, Rav and Samuel, regarding the act that Ham committed against his father (“Noah awoke from the effects of the wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him”; beyond this the Bible is silent). Rav said that Ham castrated his father, Noah; Samuel said that he sodomized him. On what basis did Rav and Samuel come to these conclusions? Certainly the curse of slavery is a severe punishment and demands a correspondingly severe crime, but why specifically castration and sodomy? In a (somewhat) different age, these rabbinic interpretations were derisively dismissed by Raoul Allier, then Dean of the Faculté libre de théologie protestante of Paris, as

HORST (Leiden, ²1999), s.vv. thykamuna, shunama, haby. It was considered obligatory in Ugaritic culture for a son to care for his drunken father. See KTU 1.17 i 30-31 (Aqhat) (M DIETRICH, O. LORETZ, J. SANMARTÍN, The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts, Münster, 1995, 48; Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, 53; J.C.L. GIBSON, Canaanite Myths and Legends, Edinburgh, 1977, p. 104, lines 31-32), which lays out the main responsibilities of a son toward his aged father among which are that he “take him by the hand in his drunkenness, and support him when he is sated with wine.” As VAN DER TOORN remarks, these filial duties are projected upon the world of the gods in the El myth (VAN DER TOORN, ibid., whose translation of Aqhat I follow). According to BENJAMIN JACOB respect for the father is the theme of the story of Noah’s drunkenness (B. JACOB, The First Book of the Bible: Genesis, abridged, edited and translated by E.I. JACOB and W. JACOB, New York, 1974, p. 68 to Gen 9:28). Another attempt to explain the story against the background of the ancient Near Eastern context (curses threatening a position of authority) was made by S. GEVIRTZ, Curse Motifs in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East (Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago, 1959), 147-148.


The account in the Sibylline Oracles 3.97-155 (Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, ed. J. CHARLESWORTH, Garden City NY, 1983, 1:364-365), dated to the mid-second century BCE, may be an echo of the same shared tradition, or it may be an attempt to accommodate the Greek story of three sons of Gaia and Ouranos (Iapetos, Kronos, Titan) to the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel. The Sibylline Oracle “is here recasting Hesiod’s Thesogony” (R. HUGGINS, “Noah and the Giants: A Response to John C. Reeves,” JBL 114 (1995) 106n17). On the Third Sibyl in general, see now J.J. COLLINS, Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora, (Grand Rapids, ²2000), 83-97, 160-165.
“born in the ghetto, of the feverish and sadistic imagination of some rabbis.”

This paper will attempt a more enlightened answer.

What did Ham do to Noah? While this paper will focus on the two rabbinic interpretations of castration and sodomy, it should be noted that the biblical text itself has been subject to numerous explanations, most of which (whether modern or premodern) assume that Ham must have done something to his father although the biblical narrative claims that he only looked at him. It is generally felt that looking alone is insufficient reason for the grave punishment of eternal servitude. But the act of looking at another’s genitals may indeed have been a grievous crime. Among the sex omens of Mesopotamia, contained in a first-millennium BCE collection of omens called šumma ṣalu, we find the following: “If a man repeatedly stares at his woman’s vagina, his health will be good; he will lay his hands on whatever is not his. If a man is with a woman (and) while facing him she repeatedly stares at his penis, whatever he finds will not be secure in his house.” Ann Guinan, who published and analyzed these omens, says that they “turn on the understanding that ‘seeing’ is an act of

4 Une énigme troublante: la race nègre et la malédiction de Cham. Les Cahiers Missionnaires no. 16 (Paris, 1930), 16-19, 32. The English statesman, Henry St. John Bolingbroke (d. 1751) goes further in his comment on the biblical story and Noah’s curse of slavery: “No writer but a Jew could impute to the economy of Divine Providence the accomplishment of such a prediction, nor make the Supreme Being the executor of such a curse” (quoted in S. Haynes, Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery, Oxford, 2002, 284).

Power is wielded by the subject who looks at another. To be the object of a look makes one vulnerable and exposed. \[S\]crutinizing observation could be a breach of boundary. Such a look can “undermine” one’s “mastery and control.”

To my knowledge, this material has not been utilized to explain the Noah incident. If GUINAN’s interpretation of the texts is correct, it may help explain the grievous nature of Ham’s act as well as the punishment of slavery. For if looking at another’s genitals will gain one “mastery and control,” then an appropriate biblical punishment for such an act would be a loss of mastery and control, i.e., servitude. In any case, whether GUINAN’s explanation of the texts is correct or not, the omens clearly indicate the power of the act of looking at another’s genitals in the Mesopotamian world, and this may provide the necessary context in which to explain at least one aspect of the biblical story, that is, what Ham did to Noah.

As for the rabbinic interpretations of castration and sodomy, surely the scene of Noah lying naked in his tent would suggest a sexual crime, and the Hebrew expression ra‘ah ‘erwah would indeed make one think of a sexual act (cf. Lev 20:17). In addition, the very name Ham, may have further suggested a sexual act since the roots hmmm and yhm can connote the sense of sexual heat, the former in Biblical Hebrew (Isa 57:5), and the latter in Palestinian Aramaic. I suggest, however, that Rav and Samuel had more specific pegs upon which to hang their interpretations. Samuel’s interpretive fulcrum is the biblical phrase ašer ʿašah lo beno ha-qatan, ‘that which his younger son had done to him.’ Since, however, aside from looking, no other act is indicated in the story, Samuel may have understood the act to have been the verb ʿašah itself, interpreting the text as “he ʿašahed Noah.” Now, ʿšh, ‘to press’ occurs in Hebrew and cognate languages with a specific sexual connotation. Ezek 23:3 (similarly 23:8): “They played the whore in Egypt … there were their breasts

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squeezed (mo’ahku, מֹאָהֵק) and there they pressed (‘iššu, עִשָּׁשְׁ) their virgin nipples”); Ezek 23:21, “when your nipples were pressed (ba’asot) in Egypt.”9 Similarly, in Ugaritic ‘ṣy is used to mean ‘sexually molest’ (grs.d.ṣy.lnh, ‘who may drive away any who would molest his guest’), and in Arabic ḡšw (ḡšy), the root meaning of which is ‘to cover, conceal,’ can mean ‘to compress,’ metonymically used for the sexual act where the object of the act can be man or woman: ‘he compressed her,’ ‘he did to him a forbidden action’ (gašiya ilaḥy mahkhirān).10 Thus, Samuel midrashically read ‘šh in the verse (whether as a pi’el or not) to mean ‘he sodomized him.’

So much for the explanation of sodomy. How was the rabbinic interpretation of castration derived?11 While Samuel’s solution, according to my proposal, was

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9 In 23:21 MSS Leningrad and Aleppo have ba’asot, which is contracted from the pi’el, as opposed to the qal (ba’asot) in the printed editions of MT; see M. GREENBERG in the Anchor Bible series, Ezekiel 21-37 (New York, 1997), ad loc. The word is also found in Biblical Hebrew in a nonsexual sense (Ps 139:15), as it is as well in Tannaitic Hebrew (e.g., mGit 9.8: get me’usēh), Amoraic Hebrew, Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Ugaritic, and Arabic; see HALOT 2:892-983, s.v. ‘asah II, and M. JASTROW, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (London/New York, 1903), 1125.


11 For scholarly discussions of the rabbinic explanation of castration, see A. I. BAUMGARTEN, “Myth and Midrash: Genesis 9:20-29,” in J. NEUSNER ed., Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults (Leiden, 1975) 3:65n57, 70n83, and C. WESTERMANN, Genesis 1-11: A Commentary, English translation by J. SCULLION (Minneapolis, 1984), 482 and 486. Many have pointed out the parallels to the Greek myth of Ouranus who is castrated by his son, Kronos, or the Hittite-Hurrian myth of the god Kumarbi who castrated his father Anu; see Dictionary of Deities (above, n. 2) 462-63, 642-43. These parallels are too general to be of much help. GOLDZIHER’S attempt to see the Noah story as representative of solar myths, in which Night (Ham, the black son) overcomes Day (Noah) with the weakening of the sun’s rays toward evening (Mythology among the Hebrews, trans. R. MARTINEAU, New York, 1967, 131) is not only far-fetched but also assumes an etymologically incorrect relationship between Ham and ħmn, ḥwn, on which point see D. GOLDENBERG, The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Princeton, 2003), 141-156. Also unlikely is the thesis of N. KOLTUN-FROMM that the castration interpretation was an attempt to counter the Christian view that saw Noah as “a significant biblical ancestor to the Christian Messiah…. By denigrating Noah’s character the rabbis can question Christian biblical exegesis if not Christianity itself” (“Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah’s Righteousness in Light of the Jewish-Christian Polemic,” in The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation, ed. J. FRISHMAN and L. VAN ROMPAY, Louvain, 1997, 67-68). This argument is problematic because the castration of Noah does not denigrate Noah’s character but that of the castrator, Ham. In rabbinic literature, to the contrary, Noah’s character is generally righteous, building upon the biblical description. Another rabbinic contravention thesis, and just as unlikely, was suggested by S. GERO, who thinks that the castration idea may have derived from...
linguistically based (‘āsāḥ), Rav may have sought a solution from a different direction. Assuming the principle of midah keneged midah (measure for measure), a principle well-established at his time (see mSot, end chap. 1), which sees punishment as aptly related to the crime, Rav would have looked to Ham/Canaan’s punishment to discern Ham’s crime. This approach would be similar to “reverse engineering,” which KUGEL likens to the study of midrashic motifs, in which the finished product is examined in an attempt “to recreate the thinking and procedures that led up to its having the form and components that it has.”13 Rav, then, would have sought to understand the nature of slavery, the punishment meted out to Canaan.

In a seminal study on slavery, ORLANDO PATTERSON wrote: “Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave’s powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death…. Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure or starvation…. The master was essentially a ransomer. What he bought or acquired was the slave’s life.”14 Speaking of Roman legal literature, KEITH BRADLEY says,

an effort to suppress a branch of Judaism which had Nimrod and Yonṭon, Noah’s fourth son born after the flood, as its heroes. A legend about a postdeluvian fourth son of Noah, is found in the Syriac Book of the Cave of Treasures, the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (also Syriac), and later Jewish and Christian literature (S. GERO, “The Legend of the Fourth Son of Noah,” HTR 73 [1980] 321-330). Gero’s hypothetical reconstruction of this branch of Judaism, according to C. LEONHARDT, “is based on several hardly verifiable assumptions”; see C. LEONHARD, “Observations on the Date of the Syriac Cave of Treasures,” in The World of the Aramaeans, ed. P.M. M. DAVIAU et al. (Sheffield, 2001) 1:287n112. On the question of whether Theophilus of Antioch (2nd century) refers to the same castration tradition with his remark that “some call [Noah] a eunuch,” see S. GERO, “The Legend of the Fourth Son of Noah,” 321n2. VOGELS thinks he does; see “Cham découvre les limites” (above, n. 5), 556. The references to “Berosus the Chaldaean,” who mentioned Ham’s castration of Noah, found in the works of Solomon b. Melekh (Mikhlo Yofi, Amsterdam, 1684, Gen 9:22) and Obadiah Sforno (Commentary to the Pentateuch, ed. Z. GOTTLEIB and A. DAROM, Jerusalem, 1980, Gen 9:22) is not the Berosus of antiquity, fragments of whose works have been preserved in classical writers, but the 1498 edition of Johannes Annius Viterbensis (d. 1502) who overlaid the original fragments with “a vast quantity of fabulous material” and whose work is known as “Berosus Annianus.” See A. WILLIAMS, The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis 1527-1633 (Chapel Hill, 1948), 14n7. The fragments of the original Berosus with commentary have been published by S. M. BURSTEIN, The Babyloniaca of Berosus (Malibu, 1978). On pseudo-Berosus, see further D. C. ALLEN, The Legend of Noah (above, n. 5), 114ff.

12 The midah principle is employed already in the Bible; K. LUKE, “Noah’s Curse” (n. 5, above) 214n34 cites as an example Gen 29:17, 21-26 with reference to Jacob’s cheating his blind father.
14 O. PATTERSON, Slavery and Social Death (Cambridge Mass., 1982), 5.
“Slavery is equated with death”; “we compare slavery closely with death.”\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, in explaining the Roman imperial proscription of selling freeborn children (or bonding them) to slavery, JOHN BOSWELL wrote: “Slavery was not simply a fate ‘worse than death’ – it \textit{was} death in the eyes of the law, since slaves were not legally persons.”\textsuperscript{16}

Just as the first and most distinctive attribute of slavery is the substitution for death, so “the second constituent element of the slave relation,” according to PATTERSON, is his status “as a socially dead person…. He ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order…. Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but by extension … on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate.” The condition of the slave is one of “natal alienation … the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations,” of which the slave’s social death was the “outward conception.” “The slave will remain forever an unborn being (non-né).”\textsuperscript{17} This aspect of slavery was recognized in Roman law and literature.\textsuperscript{18} As BRADLEY said, “By definition, slaves were kinless.”\textsuperscript{19} Such a status is also presumed in tannaitic law: the slave has no legally valid ties of kinship with his/her offspring. They are not legally related (nor are the offspring to each other).\textsuperscript{20}

Thus one who becomes a slave is ‘dead’ although not truly dead. In a process of \textit{midah-keneged-midah} reverse engineering Rav would have reasoned: what act could Ham have done to Noah to have caused a dead-but-not-dead punishment? The \textit{midah} principle would require that whatever that act was, it would have had to affect all future descendants of Noah with the same dead-but-not-dead status, for the biblical punishment is one of \textit{eternal} slavery, that is the ‘death’ of Canaan and all his future descendants. Furthermore, the dead-but-not-dead status could not affect Noah himself, for Ham, who committed the crime, was not himself cursed. Now castration, Rav might have continued, fulfills these requirements, for by causing a continuing loss of all potential life into the future one is causing the ‘death’ of

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\textsuperscript{15} K. BRADLEY, \textit{Slavery and Society at Rome} (Cambridge UK, 1994), 25
\textsuperscript{16} J. BOSWELL, \textit{The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance} (New York, 1988), 67-68.
\textsuperscript{18} PATTERSON, \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, 40.
\textsuperscript{19} K. BRADLEY, \textit{Slavery and Society at Rome}, 27.
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Noah’s potential descendants. That is, Noah’s future generations, which until the act of castration would have been born, will now forever be “unborn being(s),” non-nés, and are thus ‘dead’ although not truly dead. In sum, Ham brought about a status of ‘death’ on Noah’s descendants. As punishment paralleling the crime, therefore, Ham’s descendants, through the line of Canaan, were eternally enslaved, remaining forever ‘dead,’ in Patterson’s terms: unborn beings, non-nés. I suggest that this reasoning, together with the sexual context of the biblical scene, was behind Rav’s interpretation of the biblical story as one of castration.

The concept of slavery as social death would have certainly occurred to Rav. Not only does tannaitic law incorporate the concept, as indicated above, but an aggadic midrash seems also to know of it:

Wine separated (hifris) Noah from his children in regard to slavery ... for on account of it he said, “Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves....”

The definition of a slave as “a genealogical isolate” could not be more clear than in the statement that Noah was separated from his children in regard to slavery. A secondary development of this midrash incorporates the same idea:

Our Rabbis taught: Since Ham saw the nakedness of his father, although he [Ham] did not curse him, he and his descendants were nevertheless distanced (nitraeq) forever. How much more so (al ahat kamah we-khamah) one who curses his father.

21 Cf. Josephus’s (Ant. 4.290) designation of eunuchs as “slaughterers of children” (τέκνων σφαγῇ), and the rabbinic explanation of biblical karet as either premature death (bMQ 28a) or childlessness (bYev 55a).
22 Why it was only through Canaan’s lineage is another matter, which does not affect Rav’s line of reasoning. On this question of why the curse was restricted to Canaan of all the sons of Noah, see D. Goldenberg, The Curse of Ham (n. 11, above), 158.
23 Leviticus Rabba 12.1 (ed. M. Margulies, 253) and Esther Rabba 5.1. The redaction date of LevR is believed to be between 400 and 500 CE and EstR secs. 1-6 “after around 500 CE”; see Günter Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, trans. and ed. M. Bockmuehl (Edinburgh, 1996), 290-91, 318-19.
24 Tanhuma, Qedoshim 15 (= Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Qedoshim 15, 40a). MS Munich 224, f. 11b reads nistares (‘castrated’) instead of nitraeq! I presume that this is but scribal contamination based on Rav’s statement in bSan 70a. The Tanhuma passage is quoted in Yalqut Shimeoni, Proverbs 959, s.v. ube-tahbulot, without variant. According to M. Bregman, The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2003), pp. 166-167, 186, 188, the earliest stratum of Tanhuma (the ‘Vorlage’) is characterized by material shared by both editions of Tanhuma (‘printed’ and ‘Buber’); this stratum dates from between the 6th and 7th centuries in Israel.
The change of terminology from ‘separate’ (hifris) to ‘distance’ (nitraheq) does not seem to be relevant, for the meaning is the same, that is the social separation caused by slavery. What is relevant in this latter midrash is the comparison of Ham’s act of looking with the act of cursing or hitting a parent. While the punishment for looking was slavery (Gen 9:25), the punishment for cursing (or hitting; see below) was death (Ex 21:15, 17, Lev 20:9). The midrash is thus saying: “Ham only saw and was distanced forever. How much more so is one distanced forever if one curses a parent.” The two distancings are not the same – the first refers to slavery, the second to death – yet the midrash conflates them.

The implications of the midrashic comparison of slavery with death can perhaps be seen more clearly by looking at a later version of this midrash, as found in Exodus Rabba:

God said: Ham the father of Canaan did not hit, but only looked at [his father]. Now he and his descendants are slaves forever. How much more so (qal wa-homer) one who curses or hits his father.25

The substitution of “slaves forever” for “separated forever” is an attempt at clarity which, however, not only renders the midrashic point otiose but destroys the logic of the qal wa-homer argument employed. The implication of the qal wa-homer is that one who curses or hits one’s father would certainly have his descendants enslaved forever (in rabbinic hermeneutic terminology, dayo lavo‘ min ha-din li-hyot ka-nidon). This, of course, is not the case, for the Bible requires a death penalty for cursing or hitting. The terminology of the earlier midrashim (nithareq or hifris) levels the two punishments under the one roof of death, whether biological or social/legal. Thus, Patterson’s definition of slavery as social death is embedded in the ‘distancing’ midrash.26

In summary, I have attempted to show (1) that in the biblical narrative Ham’s act of

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25 Exodus Rabba 30.5. Such is the reading in “all good manuscripts of ExR, e.g. MS Jerusalem and MS Oxford” (Avigdor Shinan, personal correspondence). The second part of Exodus Rabba (i.e. from chapter 15 onward) belongs to the Tanhuma-Yelamedenu family of midrash literature. “Ham the father of Canaan” is a quote from the biblical verse (Gen 9:22) and is undoubtedly used by the rabbinic author deliberately, rather than simply saying “Ham,” in order to implicitly justify the curse of slavery which he mentions next and which affected only Canaan in the biblical account.

26 This interpretation of the midrash, that slavery was considered social death and that this idea lies behind the qal wa-homer, may have been so understood by Judah Loew of Prague (d. 1609), who, obviously having the midrash in mind, says: “[Ham’s] progeny became corrupted and was thus removed from society” (nitiqalqel zare‘o ve-nitraheq mi-bnei adam). See his Hiddushe aggadot, ed. Ch. Hoenig et al. (London, 1960) 3:258, to bSan 108b.
looking at his father’s genitals is to be understood in its Ancient Near Eastern context, in which such an act is considered a serious “breach of boundary,” and may also account for the biblical punishment of slavery; and (2) that the rabbinic interpretations of Ham’s act as sodomy and castration are to be understood on the basis of a linguistic association of the Hebrew root ‘šh meaning ‘to commit a sexual act, to sodomize,’ in the first case, and by an implied hermeneutic of midah keneged midah, with slavery and castration understood as forms of ‘death,’ in the second case.