

SESSION 57: BAD BEHAVIOR, PART ONE

Genesis 9:18-29

January 19, 2025

PREFACE

One thing has always bothered me about the Elves in the fictional *The Lord of the Rings*. They are immortal, unless they are killed, and absent that unhappy consequence capable of living thousands of years. One would think that if someone lived for that long a time, that they would be surrounded by hundreds of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, *ad infinitum!* All of Middle Earth should be *crawling* with Elves. Yet, Elrond, for one example, the lord of Rivendell, though having lived for thousands of years, has, effectively just one daughter: Arwen.

We have a similar situation in the *true* story of Noah. The patriarch was 600 years old at the time of the Flood; v28 tells us that after the Flood he lived another 350 years. Yet we are told that over a lifespan of 950 years Noah had only *three* sons.

Read Genesis 9:18-23.

vv18-19

There is a lot of information packed into these first two verses—but it is also easy to misinterpret some of it. Because of its brevity we must read between the lines, we must examine the original text with all its subtleties and variations—and, ultimately, form our own opinion of those things not explicitly mentioned in the text. Thus I have formed *my* interpretation, most of which is shared by others of greater scholarship, but not all.

Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem and Ham and Japheth;

The way in which this is phrased may lead one to conclude that Noah had *other* sons who did *not* emerge from the ark. The next verse, however disabuses us of that conclusion.

These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was scattered abroad.

The text of v19 seems to anticipate our uncertainty, for it emphatically stresses that “these three [i.e., not any others] were *the* sons of Noah” (emphasis added) “and from these [i.e., just these three and not any others] the whole earth was scattered abroad.”

Once again we may find ourselves wondering *Why?* or *How?* My thoughts are that if this interpretation is correct, it seems reasonable that this limitation was ordained by Yahweh God. Indeed, why did He begin Creation with just one couple? If their primary responsibility (along with Noah’s sons) was to “be fruitful and multiply,” then why not begin with more men and more women than just one couple—whose first son will be killed, no less! Here too, why not produce a *flock* of sons and daughters to repopulate the earth?

But God’s ways are not ours; He has His reasons for establishing only three lines emerging from Noah.

Shem and Ham and Japheth;

When just their names are listed, as here, this is the order, from which most scholars conclude that Shem was the oldest, followed by Ham, and then Japheth, which is the biblical pattern. This, at first, seems to contradict v24, which refers to Ham as “his youngest” in most of our newer versions (but not the KJVs). More on that later.

...and Ham was the father of Canaan.

I have always read this to be a foreshadowing inserted by the author, Moses. Now, however, I think there is a better explanation. It makes sense that more time has passed than we might first imagine since the family of eight disembarked from the ark, and by now Canaan has been born—in fact, older than just a young child, even though Chapter Ten indicates that Canaan had three older brothers (10:6). So enough time has passed for Ham to have four sons. More than that, I am beginning to think it possible that none of the three immediate sons of Noah ever left him, but it was their respective *sons* that left and spread in three directions to repopulate the earth.

But back to Canaan. We will examine this more closely later, but I believe there is ample evidence in this passage (vv18-29) that Canaan was already old enough to reveal his personality and proclivities to his grandfather (vv18, 22, 25-27).

Verses 20 and 21 offer more evidence that a considerable span of time has passed since the Flood.

vv20-21

Then Noah began to be a man of the land and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk and uncovered himself inside his tent.

It takes quite a while to plant a vineyard, harvest the mature grapes, age the wine, then get drunk on it. It's not like planting wheat and eating fresh bread the same year.

Modern science would have us believe that man began as a hunter/gatherer, and only after something like 150,000 years did he begin his transition to a more agricultural way of life. But, of course, God's word tells us that the *first* man, Adam, was a farmer:

Then Yahweh God took the man and set him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

The first son, Cain, was also a farmer:

And again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a cultivator of the ground. (Genesis 4:2)

It was perfectly natural that Noah and his family would immediately plant crops upon leaving the ark; they had to eat. We have no evidence that, as some insist, Noah was the first to plant a vineyard and make wine. If for no other reason, considering the depths of sin and depravity that caused Yahweh to destroy man and the earth, it is hard to imagine that without benefit of intoxicating beverages. Nevertheless we have no evidence either way, and this is indeed the first explicit reference to drunkenness.

Nor can we substantiate the position of some that this righteous man (Genesis 6:9) had no idea drinking so much wine would result in inebriation: "In ignorance of the fiery nature of wine, Noah drank and was drunken, and uncovered himself in his tent" (K&D). We need neither excuse Noah's excess by ignorance, or condemn him as an evil drunkard. Noah was a righteous man who sinned, and we need not invent excuses or throw stones. Noah made a mistake; end of story.

...and uncovered himself inside his tent.

The original Hebrew makes it clear that no one else caused Noah to be naked. Either in a drunken stupor he failed to cover himself, or he pushed his cloak away in his sleep—or, worse, intentionally threw off his covering. It was customary for a man to cover himself for sleep with the outer cloak he had worn during the day. (It will be this that Shem and Japheth use to cover their father.) As a response to those who would excuse the patriarch's behavior, H. C. Leupold offers this.

Leupold: He who maintained his ground over against a wicked and godless world, neglecting watchfulness and prayer in a time of comparative safety, fell prey to a comparatively simple temptation, which should have been easy to meet. It is not the young and untried Noah who sins. It is the seasoned man of God, ripe in experience, who is here brought low.

While Noah's behavior was indeed disturbing, even reprehensible, the more egregious offense was that of his son Ham.

v22

Then Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside.

There is much hiding beneath the surface of our English translations—or, perhaps better said, there *may be* much beneath the surface.

To begin, we are reminded once again that Ham is the father of Canaan. Then the verse includes two verbs that are pregnant with meaning in the Hebrew, but rendered rather sterile and innocuous in English.

First, Ham “saw” (*raah* [raw-AW]), which here does not mean that Ham passed the opening of his father's tent and just happened to catch a quick glimpse of his naked condition; he “looked at,” he “gazed with satisfaction” perhaps with lurid “satisfaction.” Some read in this verse and v24 some form of sexual activity, and that *may be* the case, but it need not be. Even absent that, Ham's behavior is egregiously disrespectful toward his father—especially made evident in contrast to that of his two brothers in the next verse.

Second, the verse says that he “told” his two brothers—implied, about what he just saw. Yet again, there is a strength and color behind the Hebrew *nagad* that is not revealed in the simple “told.” The word means to *conspicuously* declare, and “the circumstances suggest that it means ‘and he told with delight’” (Leupold). There is no way around the fact that at the least this was horrible—and childish—behavior by someone old enough to already have four sons of his own.

v23

But Shem and Japheth took the garment and laid it upon both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned backward, so that they did not see their father’s nakedness.

Here we have a righteous, respectful response to Noah’s embarrassing behavior and condition. These two men took no delight, no snide and leering fun in the fact that their father had collapsed drunk upon his bed and lay there naked as a jaybird. I take this to mean they picked up—probably from off the ground near where he lay—the cloak that should have been covering Noah. Standing next to each other while looking away from their sleeping father, they draped the garment over their inside shoulders and, keeping space between them, walked backward over Noah while letting the cloak slip off their shoulders, thus draping it over him.

Perhaps we read too much into this, but this simple act of decency seems to contain no joking ridicule (as is implied by Ham’s behavior) nor even a silent rebuke. These two sons simply wished to restore some semblance of physical dignity to their inebriated dad—along with preventing any other family members from witnessing it who might be happening upon the scene as Ham discovered it.

Verse 24 draws this uncomfortable scene to a close, and sets the scene for the prophetic proclamations that follow—which we will look at in our next session.

v24

Then Noah awoke from his wine, and he knew what his youngest son had done to him.

Let’s examine this verse in its order.

Then Noah awoke from his wine,

The word translated “wine” is the Hebrew *yayin* (YIE-yin), which means just that; implied here, however, is that he awoke from sleep no longer *impeded* by the wine he had consumed. In other words, thinking relatively clearly, in contrast to before, when he had been under the wine’s influence.

and he knew...

American politics, in conjunction with (supposed) journalism, has given us the saying, “What did he know and when did he know it?” This is applicable here: *What did Noah “know” and when did he know it?* To this we need to add, **How** did Noah know it?

I believe there are several possible answers to these questions—none of which can be absolutely proven. Let’s consider the last question first: *How did Noah know it? or From what source did Noah know it?*

- Since what follows immediately is a series of prophetic utterances, it is possible that God has placed this information in his mind. He just *knew*.
- It could be that with his mind now cleared, he *remembered*; however, one would think, if this were the case, the text would use that word.
- It is also possible that Shem and Japheth *told* their father what happened. The Hebrew *yada* (yaw-DAH) usually means “and he knew,” but can also be translated “becomes known,” “detected, discerned, discovered, learned, found out”—i.e., “knowing as the result of inquiry” (Leupold).
- Finally, one possibility is that he came to know it from evidence left behind. More on this in a moment.

As to the question of *When did he know it?* the answer seems clear: upon awakening. Which brings us to *What did Noah know?* Put another way, *What did Ham do?*

...what his youngest son had done to him.

Here is the big question. Some commentators conclude from the subsequent announcement of the “curse” prophesied about Ham’s son Canaan—and from the known history of Canaan’s descendants—that Ham may have—emphasis *may* have—performed some sexual act upon his father. I do not subscribe to that, but it remains a possibility.

By today’s behavioral standards we might find it hard to believe that Noah’s harsh response would have been generated by Ham simply turning his drunken dad’s exposed nudity into a childish joke to his brothers. But today’s behavioral standards were not the norm in ancient times. Such behavior by Ham upon the patriarch of the family would have been considered a scandalous offense. And if Ham had indeed done some physical, homosexual action upon his father, in any other family except the last family alive on earth, he would have been summarily executed (Leviticus 20:13).

More on this in our next session.

Finally, what about this verse’s reference to Ham as “his youngest son,” as it does in most of our more modern versions? The order in which Noah’s sons are listed would seem to indicate that Ham was the *middle* son, older than Japheth and younger than Shem.

There is the possibility that the references to Noah’s sons do not follow the scriptural pattern of placing the names in age order, with the oldest first, but that would be odd, since they are so consistent. A better explanation is that the Hebrew *qatan* can also mean younger (as in the KJVs), small, young, unimportant, insignificant. It is possible this word is a reference to Ham as Noah’s least important son, which is easy to believe considering the situation.

In our next session we will examine the prophecies that flow out of this unfortunate event in vv25-29.

SESSION 57

Bad Behavior, part one
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vv18-19: Three Sons

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Canaan

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Noah's Behavior

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Still, Noah should have known better.

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v24: Questions

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“Youngest son”?

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