

NOAH'S NAKEDNESS AND CURSE ON CANAAN (GENESIS 9:20–27)

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The compressed, elusive narrative of Gen 9:20–27 has been an exegetical puzzle since antiquity.¹ The terseness of the account, with its inexplicable features and subtle hints of sexual transgression, has left generations of readers and scholars feeling that there is more to the story than the narrator has made explicit. As many have pointed out, interpretive debates generally revolve around two interrelated questions: (1) the nature of Ham's offense (why would Ham's "seeing" Noah's nakedness merit a curse?), and (2) the rationale for Canaan's punishment (if Ham was the perpetrator, why was Canaan cursed?).²

The basic outlines of the story (Gen 9:20–27) are well known. After the flood, Noah plants a vineyard, drinks of its wine, becomes drunk, and uncovers himself in a tent (v. 21). Ham, identified as the father of Canaan, "sees the nakedness of his father" (וַיִּבֹּא תוֹרֵעַ אֲרִי) and tells his brothers outside (v. 22). Shem and Japheth take a garment and enter the tent backwards. With eyes averted, they cover their father (v. 23). When Noah awakens, he realizes what Ham had "done to him" (וְלֵי הַשָּׁעַ) (v. 29). He then blesses Shem and Japheth, but curses Ham's youngest son, Canaan (vv. 25–27).

Exegetes since antiquity have identified Ham's deed as either voyeurism, castration, or paternal incest. This last explanation seems to be enjoying a revival of popularity in some recent scholarship. This article will argue for a fourth possible explanation of Ham's deed: maternal incest, which simultaneously explains the gravity of Ham's offense and the rationale for the cursing of Canaan, who is the fruit of the illicit union. The full case for this view has never been adequately presented, and it is particularly apropos to do so now, given the increasing interest in the theory of paternal incest.³

In what follows we will first review the traditional explanations for Ham's offense, identifying their weaknesses. Then, building on the work of other narrative critics, we will demonstrate the exegetical basis and explanatory power of the theory of maternal incest.⁴ In particular, we will show that the

¹ For a review of rabbinic and some patristic exegesis of the passage, see Albert I. Baumgarten, "Myth and Midrash: Genesis 9:20–29," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (ed. Jacob Neusner et al.; 4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 3:55–71. Susan Niditch calls the text "intriguing and difficult" (*Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], 51), while Marc Vervenne characterizes it as "an eccentric anecdote of which the reception and interpretation are often equally fantastic" ("What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor? A Critical Re-Examination of Genesis 9.20–27," *JSOT* 68 [1995]: 55).

² See Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 66; Devorah Steinmetz, "Vineyard, Farm, and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History," *JBL* 113 (1994): 198.

³ F. W. Bassett first proposed the maternal-incest interpretation in a brief (five-page) article, without, unfortunately, marshaling all the arguments in favor of it ("Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?" *VT* 21 [1971]: 232–37). Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn endorse the theory in passing, adding some new ideas (*Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1–11* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1985], 101–3). For proponents of the theory of paternal incest, see nn. 12–13 below.

⁴ A brief word on methodology. We find ourselves most closely aligned with the narrative analysis of Robert Alter, who discerned that literary intentionality often lies behind apparent inconcinnities in the narrative of Genesis (*The Art of Biblical*

arguments for the currently popular interpretation of Ham's deed as paternal incest are more suited to support maternal incest.

I. The Traditional Views

Voyeurism

The view that Ham's offense was *voyeurism* that he did nothing more than behold his naked father—has enjoyed widespread support both in antiquity and in modernity.⁵ The strength of this position is its conservatism: it refuses to see anything in the text that is not explicit. Yet, in a sense, voyeurism is a nonexplanation, since it fails to elucidate either the gravity of Ham's offense or the reason for the curse of Canaan. It also requires the interpreter to assume the existence of a taboo against the accidental sight of a naked parent that is otherwise unattested in biblical or ancient Near Eastern literature. Donald J. Wold remarks, "Scholars who accept the literal view ... must defend a custom about which we know nothing."⁶

Some proponents of this view are content to accept the awkward features of the narrative of Gen 9:20–27 as inexplicable and/or arbitrary.⁷ However, those exegetes who, through the work of Robert Alter, Michael Fishbane, and others, have come to appreciate the literary artistry and subtlety of the biblical authors and the significance of biblical intertextuality are unlikely to find this position satisfactory.⁸ There is increasing recognition that the pentateuchal narrative is seldom careless or arbitrary, and intertextual echoes (to be examined below) are seldom coincidental.⁹

Castration

The traditional rabbinic view that Ham castrated Noah arose as an attempt to address the inadequacies of the voyeuristic interpretation.¹⁰ A classic discussion of the view is found in *b. Sanh.* 70a:

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. [With respect to the

Narrative [New York: Basic Books, 1981]). We are also instructed by Michael Fishbane's demonstration of the exegetical value of attentiveness to the complex and, at times, reciprocal interrelationships among biblical texts (*Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1984]). Guided by the work of these scholars and other exegetes, we make a heuristic "inference to the best explanation." We wish to show that the theory of maternal incest best explains the otherwise anomalous features of both the text and its relationship to its context.

⁵ E.g., H. Hirsch Cohen, *The Drunkenness of Noah* (Judaic Studies 4; University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 14–16; Allen P. Ross "The Curse of Canaan," *BSac* 130 (1980): 223–40; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 322–23; Gordon P. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 198–201; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 87; Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. I. Abrahams; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 2:149–54; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 61; Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 418–20; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion, S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 484–88.

⁶ Wold, *Out of Order*, 67.

⁷ E.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 62.

⁸ See n. 4 above.

⁹ For example, concerning the pericope under discussion, Vervenne concludes: "the tale of the drunken Noah ... has been meticulously embedded in a genealogical framework.... This precisely embedded composition ... is also a self-contained piece of art" ("What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?" 43–44).

¹⁰ For an extensive review of the rabbinic exegesis of this passage, see Baumgarten, who concludes that the rabbis developed the theory of castration as an explanation for features of the text ("Myth and Midrash," 55–71); thus, they are not transmitting an ancient tradition (contra Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], 121–22). The relevant rabbinic texts are *b. Sanh.* 70a; *Gen. Rab.* 36, 7; *Tanh.* 49–50; *Pirqe R. El.* ch. 23; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 9:24–25. The earliest reference to this theory is found in Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 3, 19.

last verse] Rab and Samuel [differ,] one maintaining that he castrated him, whilst the other says that he sexually abused him. He who maintains that he castrated him, [reasons thus:] Since he cursed him by his fourth son, he must have injured him with respect to a fourth son. But he who says that he sexually abused him, draws an analogy between “and he saw” written twice. Here it is written, And Ham the father of Canaan saw the nakedness of his father; whilst elsewhere it is written, And when Shechem the son of Hamor saw her [he took her and lay with her and defiled her]. Now, on the view that he emasculated him, it is right that he cursed him by his fourth son; but on the view that he abused him, why did he curse his fourth son; he should have cursed him himself?—Both indignities were perpetrated. (Soncino translation)

Here we see the sages grappling with the two issues of the text identified above: the gravity of Ham’s sin and the cursing of Canaan. Rab concludes that Ham must have castrated Noah. In favor of Rab’s view, one can cite examples from ancient Near Eastern mythology (although none from the Bible) of a son castrating his father as part of an effort to usurp his authority.¹¹ Thus, Rab’s view suggests a possible motivation for Ham’s crime. It also provides some rationale, albeit complex, for the cursing of Canaan: Noah curses Ham’s fourth son since Ham deprived Noah of a fourth son. What is lacking, however, is any lexical hint in the text of Gen 9:20–27 that would suggest castration.

Paternal Incest

Samuel’s alternative view—that Ham sexually abused Noah—is enjoying a surprising contemporary resurgence, gaining the support of a number of scholars who represent divergent theological and methodological approaches but are united by conviction that the literary artist of Genesis conveys something more in Gen 9:20–27 than a simple “voyeurist” reading of the passage reveals. One of the more thorough defenses of this position is by Robert Gagnon in his recently published *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, but other proponents include Anthony Phillips, Devorah Steinmetz, Martti Nissinen, Donald J. Wold, Seth Daniel Kunin, and O. Palmer Robertson.¹² In addition, Robert W. E. Forrest, Ellen van Wolde, and Susan Niditch are sympathetic, if not committed, to the view.¹³

As Hermann Gunkel, Gagnon, and many others have pointed out, the way the text describes Noah as realizing “what his youngest son *had done* (ול השע) to him” suggests some action more substantial than passive viewing.¹⁴ It suggests an act or deed of which Noah was the recipient or victim. Indeed, it so happens that the phrase used to describe Ham’s transgression—“to see the nakedness of the father” (בא תורע האר)—is an idiom for sexual intercourse.¹⁵ Leviticus 20:17 equates the idioms “to see nakedness” (הורע האר) and “to uncover nakedness” (הורע הלג):

¹¹ See Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, 122.

¹² Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 63–71; Anthony Phillips, “Uncovering the Father’s Skirt,” in his *Essays on Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 344; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 245–50; Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 193–207; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 53; Wold, *Out of Order*, 65–76; Seth Daniel Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (JSOTSup 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 173–74; O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Critical Questions Concerning the ‘Curse of Ham’ (Gen. 9:20–27),” *JETS* 41 (1998): 179.

¹³ Robert W. E. Forrest, “Paradise Lost Again: Violence and Obedience in the Flood Narrative,” *JSOT* 62 (1994): 15–16; Ellen van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1–11 and Other Creation Stories* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1997), 146; Niditch, *Chaos*, 52–53. If we have read these authors correctly, they appear to lean toward the paternal-incest view.

¹⁴ Hermann Gunkel remarks, “This cannot be all, because v. 24 presumes that Canaan [*sic*] had done something to him” (quoted in Westermann, *Genesis*, 488). Gagnon notes that “‘what his youngest son had done to him’ [*is*] not the expression one would expect to describe an unintended glance or even voyeurism” (*Homosexual Practice*, 65). See also Wold, *Out of Order*, 73; and Robertson, “Curse of Ham,” 179.

¹⁵ See Kunin, *Logic*, 174; Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 66; Hans-Jürgen Zobel, “*gālā*,” *TDOT* 2:479; Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 198: “clearly the ‘seeing of nakedness’ implies a sexual violation, as it does throughout the biblical text”; Robertson, “Curse of Ham,” 179; and Vervenne, “What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?” 49: “the key-word here, הורע ... does have an erotic and sexual connotation.”

אוה דסח ותורעתא הארת איהו התורעתא הארו ... ותחא תא חקי רשא שיאו הלג ותחא תורע ...

If a man takes his sister ... and *sees her nakedness*, and she *sees his nakedness*, it is a disgrace, ... *he has uncovered his sister's nakedness*.¹⁶

The phrase “to uncover nakedness” (הורע הלג), in turn, is the usual expression for sexual intercourse in the Holiness Code:

... תורע תולגל וברקת אל ורשב ראשלכלא שיא שיא

None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness. (Lev 18:6)

The same idiom (הורע הלג) occurs in descriptions of sexual promiscuity and sexual violence in Ezekiel 16:36–37; 22:10; 23:10, 18, 29. Thus, from an intertextual perspective, the description of Ham’s act as “seeing his father’s nakedness” implies more than a literal “seeing.”¹⁷

Besides the use of the phrase “to see nakedness” (הורע האר), there are other erotically charged lexemes in Gen 9:20–27 that suggest a situation of sexual transgression. Wine (יין), for example, is intimately connected with sexuality in both biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature.¹⁸ Significantly, the only other reference to drunkenness in Genesis also occurs in the context of parent-child incest: Gen 19:30–38, the account of Lot’s intercourse with his daughters as the origin of Moab and Ammon. The Song of Songs is replete with images of wine as a symbol of sexuality and—strikingly—the vineyard (סורכ) as a place of lovemaking.¹⁹ The drinking of wine functions as a prelude to intercourse in Song of Songs (8:2) and in the dealings of David with Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11). Uriah refuses to go home, where he would “drink and lie with [his] wife” (2 Sam 11:11), so David gets him drunk in the hopes that he will dispense with his scruples and return to enjoy his spouse (2 Sam 11:13). Other biblical examples of the association of wine with sex could be cited, and the extensive ancient Near Eastern evidence (e.g., the cult of Dionysus/Bacchus and its analogues) has been explored elsewhere.²⁰

In addition to the vineyard (סורכ) and wine (יין), there is the word used for Noah’s disrobing or “uncovering himself,” לגתי, from the root הלג. This root is used extensively in Leviticus 18 and 20 and various passages of Ezekiel, often in combination with הורע, to designate illicit (usually incestuous) sexual intercourse, and also in the two verses of Deuteronomy that condemn parent-child incest (Deut 23:1 and 27:20).²¹ Usually Noah’s disrobing is thought to be merely the result of his drunkenness, yet individuals typically do not disrobe simply because they are drunk. Noah’s “uncovering himself” in the tent certainly carries erotic overtones.²² Steinmetz comments, “Just as ‘seeing’ nakedness is more than seeing, ‘uncovering’ is more than uncovering.”²³

When Gen 9:20–27 is understood as a case of parent-child incest, literary links with other pericopes in Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch suddenly become apparent. For example, several narrative critics have suggested that Gen 9:20–27 is chiasmatically linked to Gen 6:1–4, the story of the intercourse

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all English biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

¹⁷ See Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199.

¹⁸ For an exploration of the association of wine and sexuality in ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Hebrew literature, see Cohen, *Drunkenness*, 3–6.

¹⁹ See Song 1:2, 4, 6; 2:13, 15; 5:1; 6:11; 7:2, 9, 12; 8:2, 11–12.

²⁰ See literature cited by Cohen, *Drunkenness*, 3–6.

²¹ See Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199: “To ‘uncover’ nakedness is the other term which the Bible uses to describe sexual immorality”; and Zobel, *TDOT* 2:479.

²² Cohen, *Drunkenness*, 17.

²³ Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199.

of the “sons of God” with the “daughters of men.”²⁴ One story introduces the flood narrative, and the other concludes it; Gen 5:32 continues in Gen 9:28–29, forming an *inclusio* around the two stories.²⁵ When Gen 9:22 is understood as paternal incest, it becomes clear that the two stories are united by the theme of illicit sexual intercourse as well.

Likewise, Niditch, Steinmetz, Kunin, and many others see thematic links between Gen 9:20–27 and Gen 19:30–38, the story of Lot’s daughters and the procreation of Moab and Ammon.²⁶ The similarities between the two pericopes are numerous: in the aftermath of a calamitous divine judgment, instigated by the wickedness of men—particularly sexual wickedness (cf. Gen 6:4; 19:5), which destroys the earth or a large part of it—an aged patriarch gets drunk, facilitating intercourse between parent and child, giving rise to one or more of the traditional enemies of Israel (Canaan, Moab, and Ammon).²⁷ The parallels hardly seem coincidental. Steinmetz points out that “the parallel between the Lot story and the vineyard story supports the implication of a sexual violation of Noah by his son.”²⁸

More than one scholar has noted a relationship between Gen 9:20–27 and Leviticus 18 and 20.²⁹ Leviticus 18 and 20 are integrally linked in that ch. 20 specifies the penalties for sins described in ch. 18. Both chapters are linked to Gen 9:20–27 by the words and phrases “to uncover” (הִלְגַּ), “nakedness of the father” (בֵּא תוֹרֵ), and “to see nakedness” (הוֹרֵ הָאֵר). Moreover, 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).³⁰ Several commentators have seen the introduction to Leviticus 18 (vv. 1–5) as referring to Ham’s violation of Noah, arguing either chs. 18 and 20 are a legal reflection on Gen 9:20–27 or that Gen 9:20–27 is an etiological narrative based on Lev 18:1–8.³¹ Seen in this light, it then becomes significant that the very first sexual transgression Leviticus 18 lists in association with the Hamitic nations Canaan and Egypt is parental incest, literally, “uncovering your father’s nakedness” (תֵּא ... ׁם אֲרִי) (ויבא תוֹרֵ). This would make good sense if the author/redactor of Leviticus 18 interpreted Ham’s deed in Gen 9:20–27 as a sexual violation of Noah, setting a precedent of incestuous sexual relations for his descendants.

A similar situation exists with respect to Deut 23:1:

²⁴ See Kikawada and Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*, 101–3; Wold, *Out of Order*, 70; and the comments of Forrest: “Ham’s actions may justly be associated with the activities of the ‘sons of God’ in 6:1–4 who similarly broke ranks ... Ham’s ‘offense’, with its implications of incest, echoes the account of the illicit activities of the sons of God and the daughters of men (*’dm*) which precipitated the flood.... Thus the Ham incident provides a fitting conclusion to the [Flood Narrative] with its resounding echoes of both ch. 3 and the opening pericope of 6:1–4” (“Paradise Lost,” 15–16).

²⁵ See Vervenne, “What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?” 43: “Gen. 9.28–29 virtually concludes 5.32.”

²⁶ Calum M. Carmichael notes, “The two earliest incidents of incestuous conduct in the book of Genesis involve drunkenness, first Noah’s and then Lot’s. The two incidents have much in common: the role of wine, the initiative toward the parent from the son or daughter ... the concern for future generations” (*Law, Legend, and Incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18–20* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997], 15). See also Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 70; and Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199 n. 13.

²⁷ For a thorough examination of the similarities of the passages, see Niditch, *Chaos*, 53–55.

²⁸ Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199.

²⁹ E.g., Wold, *Out of Order*, 66; Phillips, *Essays on Biblical Law*, 247–48; Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 198–99.

³⁰ See Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 198–99, esp. n. 12; Pss 105:23, 27; 106:22; 78:51.

³¹ For example, Vervenne feels that both texts are Priestly and that the author teaches by illustration in 9:20–27 what is conveyed by law in Leviticus 18 and 20: “In Gen. 9:20–27, the rules and regulations to which Israel adheres ... are projected onto the screen of primeval times” (“What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?” 52–53). Ross remarks, “The constant references to ‘nakedness’ and ‘uncovering’ and even ‘seeing’ in this passage [Lev 18:2–6] ... clearly remind the reader of the action of Ham, the father of Canaan. No Israelite ... could read the story ... without making the connection” (“Curse of Canaan,” 233–34). Gordon Wenham comments, “Lev 18:3 links both Egypt and Canaan as peoples whose habits are abominable.... Ham’s indiscretion towards his father may easily be seen as a type of the later behavior of the Egyptians and Canaanites” (*Genesis 1–15*, 201). See also Carmichael, *Law*, 14–44, and Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 149–50.

ויבא פנך הלגי אלו ויבא תשאתא שיא חקיא

A man shall not take his father's wife, and shall not uncover his father's skirt. [ASV]

Phillips argues:

Deuteronomy 23:1b is a deliberate enactment of the Deuteronomist and is part of his anti-Canaanite material. It was added at the head of the list of prohibited sexual relations in Lev 18:7–23 which the Canaanites, the former inhabitants of the land, were held to have committed (Lev 18:24–30) because no relationship was more abhorrent to the Israelites than that associated with Ham, the father of Canaan.³²

Phillips regards Ham's sin in Gen 9:20–27 as paternal incest and argues that Deut 23:1b should be understood literally, as referring to sexual relations with one's father.³³

In addition to clarifying the links between Gen 9:20–27 and other related pentateuchal texts, proponents of the paternal-incest theory point out that their view offers a possible motivation for Ham's deed. By humiliating his father, Ham hoped to usurp his father's authority and displace his older brothers in the familial hierarchy.³⁴ Nissinen notes that the story “does not speak of Ham's homosexual orientation but his hunger for power.”³⁵ This explains why Ham promptly informed his brothers of what he had done (Gen 9:22b).

An obvious objection to the paternal-incest view is that the brothers' action in v. 23 indicates that Noah's nakedness was literal; thus Ham's “seeing” in v. 22 should be taken literally (as voyeurism) rather than idiomatically (as intercourse). But the objection is not conclusive. Gagnon comments on the significance of v. 23:

The brothers' actions in “covering their father's nakedness” and taking great pains not to look at their father is compatible with an interpretation of “seeing another's nakedness” as sexual intercourse. *The brothers' actions play on the broader meaning of the phrase.* Not only did the brothers not “see their father's nakedness” in the sense of having intercourse with him, but also they did not even dare to “see their father's nakedness” in a literal sense. Where Ham's act was exceedingly evil, their gesture was exceedingly pious and noble.³⁶

Likewise, Steinmetz, while acknowledging that v. 23 “support[s] the idea that sexual violation has broader implications than whatever physical act may be involved,” nonetheless does not feel that Shem and Japheth's action “negates the implication of sexual immorality in this story.”³⁷

To summarize, the interpretation of Ham's deed as paternal incest is supported by the idiomatic meaning of the phrase “to see the nakedness of the father” (בא תורע האר) and erotic undertones of the text. It has the heuristic value of clarifying and illuminating intertextual relationships between Gen 9:20–27 and Gen 6:1–4; 19:30–38; Lev 18; 20; and Deut 23:1. It also provides a possible explanation for Ham's motivation. However, it does not address the rationale for the cursing of Canaan.³⁸

³² Phillips, “Uncovering the Father's Skirt,” 250.

³³ Ibid., 245–50. Phillips's main argument is that if “uncovering the skirt” means the same as “take to wife,” then Deut 23:1a and 23:1b are tautologous. However, “uncovering the skirt” is not exactly the same as “taking to wife”; the former refers to sexual relations, the latter to marriage.

³⁴ E.g., Nissinen (*Homoeroticism*, 53), and Gagnon, who claims, “By raping his father and alerting his brothers to the act, Ham hoped to usurp the authority of his father and elder brothers, establishing his right to succeed his father as patriarch” (*Homosexual Practice*, 66–67).

³⁵ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 53.

³⁶ Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 67 (emphasis ours). Wold (*Out of Order*, 74) and Robertson (“Curse of Ham,” 180) argue similarly.

³⁷ Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 200 n. 15.

³⁸ Paternal-incest interpreters like Wold (*Out of Order*, 75–76) and Gagnon (*Homosexual Practice*, 67) claim that their theory elucidates why Canaan rather than Ham is cursed, but in fact they must resort to diachronic (historical-critical) explanations

The arguments scholars have marshaled in favor of the paternal-incest theory are substantive. The erotic imagery of the text, the idiomatic meaning of “to see nakedness,” the parallels with other pentateuchal texts, and the nature of Ham’s deed as a familial-political power play all seem to support the supposition that Ham committed an incestuous act. To maintain in the face of this evidence that Ham merely looked at Noah is to turn a deaf ear to the literary nuances of the narrative. In what follows, however, it will be demonstrated that in almost every instance, these arguments for paternal incest are better suited to argue for maternal incest.

II. The Maternal-Incest View

We begin with the idiomatic meaning of the phrase **בא תורע האר**, “to see the father’s nakedness” (v. 22). Proponents of the theory of paternal incest are correct to equate **הורע האר** with **הורע הלג**, “to uncover nakedness” via Lev 20:17, understanding both as euphemisms for sexual intercourse. However, one may take this valid insight one step further by recognizing that in all the relevant texts, **הורע האר/הלג** is associated with heterosexual activity, and “the nakedness of the father” (**בא תורע**) actually refers to the mother’s nakedness.³⁹ For example, in Lev 18:7–8, the “nakedness of your father” is defined as “the nakedness of your mother”:

**תשא תורע 8 התורע הלגת אל אה רמא הלגת אל רמא תורעו ריבא תורע 7
אה ריבא תורע הלגת אל ריבא**

⁷You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.

⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is the nakedness of your father.

Likewise, Lev 18:14, 16; 20:11, 13, 21 all describe a woman’s nakedness as the nakedness of her husband. The same logic is at work in Deut 23:1 and 27:20, which describe intercourse with one’s father’s wife as “uncovering the father’s skirt” (**ויבא פנכ הלג**).

On the contrary, the two verses in the Pentateuch that condemn homosexual relations (Lev 18:22 and 20:13) use the verb **בכש**, not **הורע האר/הלג** as in Gen 9:21–23. No combination of the terms **חורע**, **האר**, and/or **הלג** is found associated with homosexual relations anywhere in the Bible.

Therefore, the phrase **ובא תורע האר** in Gen 9:22 is a euphemism for sexual intercourse indeed, but heterosexual rather than homosexual intercourse. If we take full account of the nuance of the biblical idiom, the statement that Ham “saw his father’s nakedness” implies relations with Noah’s wife, presumably Ham’s mother. This is supported by the fact that the imagery of the vineyard (**סרכ**) and wine (**יין**) is associated only with heterosexual intercourse in the Bible, whether in the story of Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:30–38), the David-Uriah-Bathsheba affair (2 Sam 11), or the Song of Songs (Songs 1:2, 4; 2:4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:9; 8:2). For example, the Song writer sings of male-female relations when he (or she) exclaims, “your kisses [are] like the best wine” (7:9) and “let us go out early to the vineyards.... There I will give you my love” (7:13).

not necessarily tied to the paternal-incest hypothesis. In other words, they tacitly concede that paternal incest does not make sense of the cursing of Canaan *within the logic of the narrative itself*.

³⁹ See Gagnon, *Homosexual Practice*, 69 n. 72: “The prohibition against intercourse with ‘your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother’ refers to intercourse with one’s mother, not one’s father.” Besides its use in Leviticus 18 and 20, the phrase occurs only in Ezek 22:10, where Ezekiel is quoting a list of sins from the Holiness Code (see *ibid.*, 66 n. 67). Thus, outside of Genesis 9, the phrase “nakedness of the father” (**באתו רע**) in the Bible always refers to the nakedness of the father’s wife.

It is salutary to recall that in Gen 9:1–17, the pericope immediately preceding the narrative under discussion, Noah and his sons are twice given the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (9:1, 7).⁴⁰ Genesis 9:19 (“from these the whole earth was peopled”) suggests that the sons fulfilled this command, and 9:18, 22 stress Ham’s role as progenitor of Canaan. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to interpret Noah’s and Ham’s actions in 9:20–22 in the context of procreative activity, however imperfect or distorted. Noah drank and disrobed in an effort to procreate; Ham intervened and succeeded.

Specifically, if Ham’s deed is understood as maternal incest, it becomes possible to explain Canaan’s origin as the fruit of that union. This insight suddenly illuminates two aspects of the text left unanswered by paternal-incest theorists: why Canaan is cursed, and why Ham is repeatedly identified as “the father of Canaan.” Canaan is cursed because his origin was a vile, taboo act on the part of his father. Ham is repeatedly, and apparently superfluously, identified as “the father of Canaan” (vv. 18 and 20) because the narrator wishes to signal the reader that this narrative explains *how Ham became* “the father of Canaan.” Van Wolde remarks:

The text opens ... ‘Ham was *the father of Canaan*’ (9:18). It is striking that Ham is named *father* at the precise moment when he is introduced as a son. Later, at the transgression of Ham, exactly the same thing happens: “Ham, *the father of Canaan*, saw the nakedness of his father’ (9:22). It sounds rather stupid... Evidently the text wants to put all the emphasis on the fatherhood of Ham or, rather, on the fact that he is the father of Canaan.⁴¹

The repetition is not stupid, however, if the pericope is explaining how Ham fathered Canaan.

Once Ham’s offense is understood as heterosexual and procreative (of Canaan), the links that paternal-incest theorists recognize between Gen 9:20–27 and Gen 6:1–4; 19:30–38; Lev 18 and 20; Deut 23:1; and 27:20 are clarified and strengthened. All these other passages concern heterosexual intercourse.

As mentioned above, scholars correctly (in our opinion) note an anti-Hamitic, anti-Canaanite polemic in the Holiness and Deuteronomic laws forbidding incest (Lev 18; Deut 23:1; 27:20), but the categories of incest listed are all heterosexual.⁴² Significantly, the first category of incest that Leviticus 18 associates with the Hamitic nations Canaan and Egypt is with the father’s *wife* (Lev 18:6, 7), which is also the subject of Deut 23:1 and 27:20.⁴³ A strong etiological link between these laws and Gen 9:20–27 may be present if Ham’s sin was maternal incest.

Furthermore, it is somewhat awkward to explain, on the theory of paternal incest, why the apparently related passages Gen 6:1–4 and Gen 19:30–38 concern the production of wicked offspring through illicit sexual union, but Gen 9:20–27 produces no offspring. Kunin concludes that “Canaan is symbolically the barren fruit of this relationship” between Ham and his father,⁴⁴ while Niditch, recognizing that Gen 9:20–27 does not fit the pattern of procreative sexuality, is puzzled at how “a homosexually incestuous symbolic action in some way further[s] the creation and ordering process” that she sees operative in these narratives.⁴⁵ The awkwardness is removed under the theory of maternal incest. All three pericopes (Gen 6:1–4; 9:20–27; and 19:30–38) concern the production of wicked offspring through illicit sexual union.⁴⁶ In particular, Gen 9:20–27 and 19:30–38 are both concerned with the repopulation of the earth

⁴⁰ See Kikawada and Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*, 102.

⁴¹ Van Wolde, *Stories*, 146.

⁴² Ironically, Gagnon himself recognizes this: “None of the prohibitions of specific forms of incest in Lev 18:6–18; 20:11–21 mentions acts of incest between two males” (*Homosexual Practice*, 69).

⁴³ Phillips’s argument that Deut 23:1b should be read literally, as prohibiting intercourse with the father himself, has garnered little support. See n. 33 above.

⁴⁴ Kunin, *Logic of Incest*, 175.

⁴⁵ Niditch, *Chaos*, 54.

⁴⁶ Forrest notes that if it is “Noah’s wife with whom Ham has an incestuous relationship ... the balance with the ‘sons of God’ episode is even more marked. Just as they violate order with their inappropriate relationships with the daughters of men, so Ham similarly violates the natural order through intercourse with his mother” (*Paradise Lost*, 16 n. 30).

(cf. 9:1, 7, 19; 19:31–32) after a (super)natural disaster and offer etiologies explaining the low state of Israel’s traditional enemies (Canaan, Moab, Ammon) due to their origins in parent-child incest. As noted above, Steinmetz argues that the parallels between Gen 9:20–27 and 19:30–38 support “the implication of a sexual violation of Noah by his son.”⁴⁷ It could be argued further that the relationship between Gen 9:20–27 and Gen 19:30–38—as well as Gen 6:1–4; Lev 18:1–8; Deut 23:1; and 27:20—all support the implication of sexual violation of Noah’s *wife* by her son.

There is a rationale behind the ascription of the origins of Canaan and Moab/Ammon to different forms of incest (son-mother vs. father-daughter). The origins of the Canaanites, toward whom Israelite traditions often direct the most deep-seated antagonism,⁴⁸ are ascribed to a more serious form of incest; while Moab and Ammon, with whom the antagonism was slightly less, are granted an origin in less serious transgression. Intercourse between father and daughter, while certainly transgressive, was less serious in ancient Near Eastern and Israelite society than intercourse between son and (step-)mother. Although both were forbidden (Lev 18:7–8, 17),⁴⁹ intercourse between son and (step-)mother openly threatened the patriarchal authority structure of the family or clan. Bassett remarks, “A son who has sexual relations with his mother or step-mother commits a rebellious sin against his father, since the possession of a man’s wife is seen also as an effort to supplant the man himself.”⁵⁰

Thus, Nissinen and Gagnon may be correct in viewing Ham’s transgressive sexual act as an attempt to usurp Noah’s patriarchal authority. However, they identify Ham’s act as the violation of Noah himself, and there is no precedent in biblical or ancient Near Eastern documents for paternal rape as a means of usurping a father’s position.⁵¹ Why would intercourse with the father serve to acquire his authority? But there is abundant attestation of sleeping with one’s father’s *wives* as a means of usurpation.⁵² Absalom’s infamous public intercourse with his father’s concubines (2 Sam 15:20–23), Reuben’s relations with Bilhah (Gen 35:22; 49:3–4), David’s acquisition of Saul’s concubines (2 Sam 12:8), and Adonijah’s attempt to acquire David’s wife Abishag (2 Kgs 2:13–25) are all notable examples of a son attempting to unseat his father through relations with the paternal consort(s). Ezekiel rebukes his contemporaries for committing this sin (Ezek 22:10).

As for ancient Near Eastern literature, there is the myth of Baal-Hadad, who castrates El and takes El’s wife Asherah as his own in an effort to acquire his father’s royal authority,⁵³ and a similar Sumerian creation account in which the wind god Enlil—the son of the sky god An and the earth goddess Ki—separates his parents from each other and absconds with his mother, eventually replacing An as chief of

⁴⁷ Steinmetz, “Vineyard,” 199 n. 13.

⁴⁸ The actual historical question of the relationship between Israel and the Canaanites has, of course, been complicated by proposed historical reconstructions that envision Israel arising from Canaanite populations (e.g., Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 BCE* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979]). However, in the present form of the Pentateuch, anti-Canaanite polemic appears dominant (Gen 24:1; 34:30–31; Exod 23:23; 33:2; Deut 7:1–5; 20:17–18; etc.) and that attitude is reflected, we propose, in the texts under discussion.

⁴⁹ Leviticus 18:7–8 prohibits maternal or step-maternal incest; 18:17 forbids intercourse with any daughter of a woman with whom one has had sexual relations. Since a man’s daughter would always also be the daughter of a woman with whom he has had relations, Lev 18:17 would seem necessarily to prohibit all forms of father-daughter incest.

⁵⁰ Bassett, “Noah’s Nakedness,” 236.

⁵¹ Bassett, “Noah’s Nakedness,” 236.

⁵² Gagnon cites the Egyptian myth of Horus and Seth (in which Seth violates Horus) and a certain Mesopotamian omen text as evidence, but both explicitly concern intercourse between peers or brothers, not between father and son (*Homosexual Practice*, 47, 52, 66–67).

⁵³ See Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, “The Political Import of David’s Marriages,” *JBL* 99 (1980): 507–18, here 508: “That through the carnal knowledge of a suzerain’s harem a man could lay claim to suzerainty himself was a custom apparently well-founded in Israel (2 Sam 3:6–10; 16:20–23; 1 Kgs 2:13–25).”

⁵⁴ See Bassett, “Noah’s Nakedness,” 236; and Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict between El and Ba’al in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 112–18.

the Sumerian pantheon.⁵⁴ An obvious Greek parallel for the usurpation of the father's position through (among other things) the possession of the mother is the myth of Oedipus.

Placing Ham's maternal incest into the larger framework of the ancient Near Eastern concept of supplanting a man (or more exactly, a father) by sleeping with his wives validates Nissinen and Gagnon's instinct that Ham's act was not primarily one of lust or capricious malevolence but a familio-political power play, an attempt to acquire his father's authority and circumvent the rights of his older brothers, whom he immediately informs of what he has done (v. 23a).

So far we have seen that the maternal-incest view, in comparison with the paternal-incest theory, takes better account of the nuance of the Hebrew idiom **בא תורע האר/הלג**, recognizes the *heterosexual* eroticism of certain terms in the text, offers a rationale for the cursing of Canaan, clarifies and strengthens the thematic links between Gen 9:20–27 and other obviously related pentateuchal passages, and provides a better account of Ham's motivation and *modus operandi*, supported by biblical and ancient Near Eastern analogues.

It remains to be explained how exactly the story should be *read* if Ham's crime was maternal incest. Perhaps as follows: Noah becomes drunk and disrobes in "her tent" (**הלהא**)⁵⁵ in preparation for intercourse but is incapacitated by his drunkenness (v. 21). Ham enters and "sees his father's nakedness," that is, engages in relations with his father's wife (v. 22a). He exits and informs his brothers of his grasp at familial power (v. 22b), perhaps producing an article of clothing as proof of his claim. The brothers, in turn, act with excessive filial deference and piety in returning "the garment" (**הלמשה**)⁵⁶ to their humiliated father, avoiding not only the figurative "seeing of the father's nakedness" (i.e., maternal incest) but the literal as well. In the aftermath of the event, Noah curses the product of Ham's illicit union, namely, Canaan, and blesses Shem and Japheth for their piety.

The same objection may be raised against this reading that was raised against the paternal-incest theory, namely, the brothers' action in v. 23 indicates that Noah's nakedness should be considered literally and not idiomatically in v. 22. The arguments presented above of Gagnon, Steinmetz, and others dealt adequately with this difficulty and are equally applicable to the maternal-incest theory. The brothers' action plays on the broader sense of the phrase "to see nakedness." Not only do they not "see their father's nakedness" in the sense of having intercourse with his wife; they also refrain from seeing his literal nakedness, and by covering him with a garment, restore to him a measure of the dignity damaged by Ham's attempted usurpation.

The objection has also been raised that vv. 24–25 imply that Noah pronounced the curse on Canaan immediately, before the nine months necessary for him to be born according to the maternal-incest theory. But the narrator may have simply compressed the chronology at this point, as he does elsewhere. After all, Gen 5:32 ("After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth") should not be taken to mean that Noah's wife bore triplets shortly after his five-hundredth birthday.

⁵⁴ See Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 4; and Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 39–40.

⁵⁵ It is suggestive that the consonantal form **הלהא** appears to have the feminine possessive suffix (see Cohen, *Drunkenness*, 8, and *Gen. Rab.* 36:7; although the MT points the word according to the *qērê* ' **להא**, "his tent"). Cohen, Kikawada and Quinn (*Before Abraham Was*, 102), and the rabbinic sages suggest it is the tent of Noah's wife. The feminine form **להא** also occurs, for example, in Gen 24:67, where Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother to consummate their marriage. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine whether the form **להא** in v. 21 is intentionally feminine, or an example of archaic orthography for the masculine pronominal suffix (see Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2:161).

⁵⁶ The word has the definite article. Hermann Gunkel (*Genesis* [trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997], 80), Gagnon (*Homosexual Practice*, 65), and others suggest that it is Noah's garment.

Nonetheless, it does seem as though, if the maternal-incest theory is correct, the text has been elided or compressed. The ancient audience may have known the full details of the traditional story and so would not have required a more explicit account, or the account may have been edited with a euphemistic *Tendenz* out of deference for the reputation of the patriarch and matriarch. In any event, given the complexities of the transmission of these traditions in antiquity, it is not difficult to imagine that narrative elision or compression has taken place.

III. Conclusion

In the review of the various interpretive options for Gen 9:20–27 above, it has been seen that the voyeurist position, which understands Ham’s deed as nothing more than looking, fails to explain the gravity of Ham’s sin or the cursing of Canaan. The castration view suffers from a lack of textual support. The currently popular paternal-incest interpretation has much to commend it, but in almost every case the evidence marshaled for this view actually better suits the maternal-incest theory. The heuristic strengths of the maternal-incest interpretation are manifold: it explains (1) the gravity of Ham’s sin, (2) the rationale for the cursing of Canaan rather than Ham, (3) Ham’s motivation for committing his offense, (4) the repetition of “Ham, the father of Canaan,” and (5) the sexually charged language of the passage. In addition, biblical and ancient Near Eastern analogues for Ham’s crime are easy to find, and the related passages of the Pentateuch fit together more elegantly on this interpretation.¹

¹ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 25-40, ed. Gail R. O'Day, 25-40 (Decatur, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).