

The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON XLII : GENESIS 9:24–29 – NOAH’S INVOCATION / PROPHECY OF HIS THREE SONS

Second Paragraph — Blessing and Curse:

²⁴ So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. ²⁵ Then he said: “Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren.” ²⁶ And he said: “Blessed be the Lord, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.”’
(Gen 9:24-27 NKJV)

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation:

**v. 24 – When Noah awoke from his wine / and knew
what his youngest son had done to him,**

v. 25 – he said,

‘Cursed be Canaan; / a slave of slaves / shall he be to his brothers’

v. 26 – He also said,

‘Blessed be YHWH, / the God of Shem;

and let Canaan be / his slave.

v. 27 – God enlarge Japheth, / and let him dwell in the tents of Shem;

and let Canaan be / his slave.’

v. 24 – When Noah awoke from his wine and knew — How Noah discovered what had happened to him is not related since it is not relevant to the story, but the brevity of the narrative does leave unanswered questions.

what his youngest son had done to him, — It is unwarranted to press the verb ‘*had done*’ (Hebrew, ‘*āsāh*’) to mean some physical act or abuse; ‘*āsāh*’ is simply the common word for ‘*do, make.*’ See lesson 41 for more detail.

WHAT IS THE BIRTH ORDER? — ‘*his younger / youngest son.*’ This is surprising since the usual order of names, ‘*Shem, Ham and Japheth*’ leads one to suppose that Ham was the second in the family, but most I am studying believe Japheth was the first-born (10:21), Shem the middle son (11:10) and Ham the youngest (9:24). “Further on, Shem is described as ‘*the brother of Japheth the eldest,*’ which ... is a term commonly used in the ancient system of fratriarchy or head-ship of the brother, which required the brothers to be designated in relation to their first-born brother. ***This passage, therefore establishes that Japheth was the eldest; and our verse, which calls Ham ‘the youngest son of Noah,’ informs us that Ham was the third and that Shem was consequently the second.***” [Cassuto, 2:164f] ***As to why that order is not given here is simply that the order of names are not always based upon birth order.*** For example, Gen 25:9 says, ‘*Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him,*’ although Ishmael was born before Isaac. Similarly, in the list of Jacob’s sons given at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the brothers are not enumerated in the order of their birth, but the sons of the wives precede the sons of the handmaids. In the following chapter which lists the genealogy of Noah’s sons, Japheth comes first and thereafter Ham and at the end Shem. Therefore there are different methods of drawing up lists.

NOAH'S INVOCATION / PROPHECIES OF HIS THREE SONS

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'Cursed be CANAAN; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers'

²⁶ *He also said,*

'Blessed be YHWH, the God of SHEM; and let Canaan be his slave.

²⁷ *God enlarge JAPHETH, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.'*

v. 25 – he said, — What follows is rendered in poetic verse, calling for curse and blessing (vv. 25-27). *These are the only words heard from the mouth of Noah in the whole of the narrative.*

'Cursed be Canaan; — “‘Cursed’ – Hebrew, *'ārar* ; cf. 8:21. *This is the first time a man is recorded as uttering a curse.*

a slave of slaves — cf. the expressions *'leader of the leaders'* (Num 3:32), *'King of kings and Lord of lords'* (Rev 19:16). If taken literally the Canaanites would be enslaved even by people who are themselves subjugated; or if it is a figure of speech then it would mean they would be *'the lowliest of slaves.'*

shall he be to his brothers' — *i.e., Shem and Japheth. Thus the Canaanite people will serve the other nations in general. Note this is not to the other members of the Hamitic race but to Shem and Japheth.* [Skinner, 1:184]

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PASSAGE — It must be remembered that at the time Moses was writing / transcribing Genesis from ancient sources, Israel was dealing with the ancestors of Noah's three sons. *“Ham's crime and Noah's blessing and curse convey the moral setting for interpreting the postdiluvian world into which Israel's fathers were born. For the narrator nothing takes place in a moral vacuum. The moral character of the nations and their destiny is foreshadowed in their fathers' behavior.”* [Mathews, 1:350]

What follows is a good overview of the passage by Rabbi Umberto Cassuto:

“THE PURPOSE of this narrative in its present form is to characterize, from the viewpoint of Israel's Torah, the three branches of mankind that are descended from the three sons of Noah, and to illustrate their attributes by reference to the personality of their primogenitors.

“To the **'sons of Shem'** belongs the spiritual merit that they, or at least their great men, preserved the knowledge of YHWH (v. 26: *'Blessed be YHWH, the God of Shem'*), who guided them in the paths of moral righteousness. This knowledge was handed down in the course of the generations to Abraham, who proclaimed it to the world and dedicated thereto his life and the lives of his sons and spiritual heirs.

“The **'sons of Ham'** – especially those of them who came in direct contact with the children of Israel, namely, the Egyptians and Canaanites – acted in sexual matters in accordance with customs that the Israelite conscience regarded as utterly abominable. Not without reason does the section on Forbidden Relations begin with these words (Lev. 18:3): *'You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes.'* Nor is it stated without cause at the end of the section (vv. 24ff.): *'Do not defile*

yourselves by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am casting out before you defiled themselves; and the land became defiled, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep My statutes and My ordinances and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for all of these abominations the men of the land did, who were before you, so that the land became defiled); lest the land vomit you out, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.'

“As for the **‘sons of Japheth,’** who were not so well known to the Israelites, it was sufficient, in their case, to indicate negative qualities: on the one hand they did not attain to the knowledge of YHWH as did the sons of Shem, but only to a general conception of the Godhead (in v. 27, *‘God enlarge Japheth,’* the name *’Elōhîm* [‘God’] occurs and not the personal name YHWH, as in v. 26 in connection with Shem), and on the other hand, they did not practice morally reprehensible customs like the sons of Ham, but were comparable in this respect to the sons of Shem.

“All these characteristics of the three branches of humanity are presented to us by the narrative as though they were embodied – and forecast – in the different personalities of the three eponyms.” [Cassuto, 2:149f] Henry Morris makes a similar summation: ***“Shem was mainly motivated by spiritual considerations, Japheth by intellectual, and Ham by physical; and the same would be true (in a very general way, of course) of the nations descending from them, by reasons of both genetic inheritance and parental example.”*** [Morris, 240] ***“Ham’s impropriety toward the nakedness of his father prompted an oracle with far-reaching implications: Canaan was cursed, but Shem (the ancestor of Israel) and Japheth enjoyed the blessing. It seems almost incredible that a relatively minor event would have such major repercussions. But consistently in Genesis one finds that the fate of both people and nations is determined by occurrences with the ancestors that seem trivial and commonplace. The main characters of these stories acted on natural impulse in their own interests, but the narrator was concerned with the greater significance of their actions. Out of the virtues and vices of Noah’s sons grew the virtues and vices of the families of the world.... Genesis 49 is a parallel passage; it records Jacob’s oracle concerning the future of the tribes. In both passages – here at the end of the primeval events and there at the end of the patriarchal stories – the one giving the oracle uses the nature and actions of his sons to anticipate their descendants’ destinies.”*** [Ross, 209ff]

NOAH’S ‘PROPHECIES’? — Most I am using in my studies do not refer to these as *‘prophecies.’* If these are prophecies, how are we to understand the many other *‘blessings / curses’* in the Scriptures; are they likewise prophecies? Those I am studying focuses rather upon how we are to understand a *‘blessing / curse’* when uttered by a mortal man (in contrast to the immortal God of Heaven). These words of Noah are prophetic only in the sense that we see evidence that the Lord did fulfill these blessings / curses.

ARE NOAH’S STATEMENTS WISHES, PRAYERS, OR DECREES? — When a **human being** invokes a blessing or a curse, it could be one or more of the following:

- the blessing or curse is **precatory** or **optative**; i.e., *the blessing or curse describes something expressing a wish or a hope rather than a command, equivalent to English expressions ‘if only.’*
- the blessing or curse is an **invocation**; i.e., *the blessing or curse is a prayer, the action of appealing to someone or something as an authority for assistance.*

- the blessing or curse is an **effective decree**; i.e., *the blessing or curse is an official order as if issued by a legal authority.*

So the question naturally arises: is Noah praying and / or wishing that Canaan will be cursed, or is Canaan cursed because Noah has pronounced the anathema? That is the question which guides our understanding of this passage (and other like narratives; cf. Gen 49). *This is only a concern when considering the pronouncements of man; when the Lord pronounces a blessing or a curse, quite obviously He has the authority and power to see that blessing or curse through to the end (Gen 3:14, 17-19; 4:11). But since human beings lack both the authority and the power to follow through with such blessings or curses, what are we to make of such statements?* Some general points to consider as we evaluate this question:

- **Many ancients (both in paganism and ancient Israel) believed blessings and curses were fulfilled as if by magic** — *“In the ancient East there was current the belief, based on the concept of the magic power of the spoken word, that blessings and curses, and particularly curses, once uttered, act automatically and are fulfilled of their own accord, as it were, unless another force opposes and annuls them.* This explains the important place occupied in **Eastern religions**, and especially in the cults of the **Mesopotamian peoples and the Hittites**, by the magical incantations of the priests, whose object was to nullify the power of the anathemas pronounced by one of the gods or a human being. The belief in the power of blessing and curse existed among the Israelites, too, not only in the Biblical period but also in Talmudic times, and it continues to our own day. In the Bible we find traces of this belief not only in the cited statements of Gentiles — for instance, in the words of the king of Moab, who believed in the magic power of **Balaam’s imprecations** (Num. 22:6: *‘for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed’*), but also in the utterances of Israelites. For example, **Micah’s mother**, who had previously cursed the one who stole a sum of money from her, on hearing that the thief was her son, instantly hastened to nullify the power of the curse by a blessing: *‘Blessed be my son by the Lord’* (Judges 17:2). Similarly, to quote another example, when **Jacob** was afraid lest his father curse him, if he should come before him instead of his elder brother, **Rebekah** immediately said to him: *‘Upon me be your curse, my son’* (Gen. 27:13), in order to remove the effect of the curse from her son onto herself. *But these are only the remarks of individual Israelites, and the Bible simply relates the stories and reflects the beliefs current among the people, which do not, however, accord with Israel’s true faith. The sublime religion of Israel cannot acquiesce in such a conception.”* [Cassuto, 2:155f]

- **Human blessings or curses are only wishes and prayers that God may or may not be willing to fulfill** — *“In the view of Israel’s Torah, it is impossible to imagine that a man’s word should have the power to effect anything without God’s will, for only from the Lord do evil and good issue. Human blessings are, according to the Torah, no more than wishes and prayers that God may be willing to do this or that. So, too, human imprecations, in so far as they are not iniquitous, are, in the ultimate analysis, but prayers that God may act in a given way. The Lord, needless to say, may not grant the request of the person that blesses or curses, and He may or may not act according to his wish; it all depends on the Divine will* (compare Psa. 109:28: *‘Let them curse, but do Thou bless! When they arise they shall be put to shame, but Thy servant shall rejoice’*).” [Cassuto, 2:156]

● **Those who attribute ‘magic power’ to Israel’s blessings / curses fail to distinguish between individual beliefs and what the Bible teaches** — According to Rabbi Cassuto [2:156], it is true many contemporary exegetes are inclined to attribute to the Torah itself the belief in the magic power of blessing and curse, but *those who hold these views have not distinguished between folk beliefs and the concepts of the Torah*. The ‘magic power’ of blessings and curses is rebutted not only by the basic principle taught in the Pentateuch but by the wording of these blessings and curses themselves. In particular, two aspects of the formulation call for attention:

(a) the verbs appear mostly in the **jussive** which expresses a ‘*desire or request, a petition or prayer*’ (see the next bullet point for more detail);

(b) the good or evil deed is attributed mostly to God himself (e.g., Gen. 27:28, in the benediction of Isaac: ‘*May God give you,*’ etc.). *It is clear from this that in such cases the one who blesses or curses is only making a supplication to God.*

How can we apply the aforementioned general observations to our specific passage?

● **This passage is best taken as a verbal request rather than a decree** — The Hebraists I am using in these studies points to the grammar which gives us clues as to how to understand this particular passage. As just mentioned by Rabbi Cassuto, this passage uses the Hebrew **jussive** which is “*a verb mood used to express wishes, exhortations, or indirect commands (like ‘let him go,’ ‘may they bless’).*” Kenneth Mathews agrees *this should be understood as a request because the Hebrew verbal mood expresses a wish in the last triplet, ‘May God extend.’ Thus its parallel words in the former lines, ‘cursed’ and ‘blessed,’ while imperatives in form, have the force of request. This is supported by the same verbal mood in ‘May Canaan be’ occurring twice in vv. 26, and 27.* Victor Hamilton agrees and adds that *the word ‘cursed’ in v. 25 is passive, again not a declarative statement but rather an action dependent upon He who is able to fulfil such requests.* If we put their statements concerning the grammar into these verses, the passage reads as follows:

²⁵ *he said,*

‘Cursed [passive participle] be CANAAN; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers’

²⁶ *He also said,*

‘Blessed [passive participle] be YHWH, the God of SHEM; and let Canaan be [jussive] his slave.

²⁷ *May God enlarge [jussive] JAPHETH, and let [jussive] him dwell [probably jussive] in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be [jussive] his slave.’*

“This recommends that all the verbal forms should be rendered as prayers of invocation. Noah’s words held no magical powers that destined the fates of future generations. His appeal was to God, whose will alone counted for what would become of the nations.” [Mathews, 1:422] ***“That Noah appeals to God in v. 27 also lifts the words of Noah out of the area of potent magic and into the realm of request.”*** [Hamilton, 1:324]

passive participle – a verb form used to indicate that the noun it describes is receiving an action rather than performing it

● **Noah's blessings and curses were based upon the moral tendencies of each of Noah's sons as Noah (through the Holy Spirit) discerned them to be** — To understand the words of Noah with reference to his sons (vers. 25-27), we must bear in mind, *on the one hand, that as the moral nature of the patriarch was transmitted by generation to his descendants, so the diversities of character in the sons of Noah foreshadowed diversities in the moral inclinations of the tribes of which they were the head; and on the other hand, that Noah, through the Spirit and power of that God with whom he walked, discerned in the moral nature of his sons, and the different tendencies which they already displayed, the germinal commencement of the future course of their posterity, and uttered words of blessing and of curse, which were prophetic of the history of the tribes that descended from them.* [Keil, 1:156f]

In summation . . .

Noah made supplication to God to deal with each of his sons' descendants and God fulfilled the request because it was just and according to His will — *“According to the view prevailing today, the purpose of the passage is to explain that the subjugation of Canaan by Shem and Japheth was due to the fact that Noah had cursed him in ancient times and his imprecation acted magically, creating and shaping the events. But this cannot be the intention of the Torah. It is inconceivable that the Torah, which is imbued with perfect faith in the absolute dominion of God in the world, should come to tell us that because certain words fell from the lips of Noah in a moment of anger, the Lord of the universe was compelled to tolerate the occurrence of given events that were not in accord with His will, or were even in conflict therewith and militated against His original intention, to the point of allowing calamity to befall innocent people as a result of the magical power of those words.... The meaning of the text can be only this, that the wholly righteous man made supplication that God should execute righteous judgement and deal with each one according to his deserts (and also with the descendants of Ham, who behave like their ancestors), and since the request was just and accorded with the will of the Judge of the whole earth, He granted it.”* [Cassuto, 2:157]

THE CURSE ON CANAAN IS NOT A CURSE ON THE BLACK RACE — As a new believer I was exposed for several years to the teaching of Peter Ruckman. He among others believe this ‘Canaanite curse’ was to be applied to the black race. However as I grew in the Christian faith, I learned that understanding *at best* was based upon faulty Bible exegesis and a lack of thorough understanding the table of nations (Gen 10). *“There are no grounds in our passage for an ethnic reading of the ‘curse’ as some have done, supposing that some peoples are inferior to others. Here Genesis looks only to the social and religious life of Israel’s ancient rival Canaan, whose immorality defiled their land and threatened Israel’s religious fidelity (cf. Lev 18:28; Josh 23). It was not an issue of ethnicity but of the wicked practices that characterized Canaanite culture. The biblical revelation made it clear that if Israel took up the customs of the Canaanites, they too would suffer expulsion.”* [Mathews, 1:423] *“Since it confines the curse to this one branch within the Hamites, those who reckon the Hamitic peoples in general to be doomed to inferiority have therefore misread the Old Testament as well as the New.”* [Kidner, 104] *“The supposed ‘curse of Ham’ has even been used in regard to skin shade. Such is nonsense and this false teaching needs to be stopped.”* [Ham, 220]

WHEN AND HOW WAS THIS FULFILLED? — “How and when this prediction of Canaan’s subjection to Shem and Japheth was fulfilled is another subject of disagreement. Skinner sums up

the problem neatly: *‘Three points may be regarded as settled: that Shem is that family to which the Hebrews reckoned themselves; that Canaan stands for the pre-Israelitish inhabitants of Palestine; and that the servitude of Canaan to Shem at least includes the subjugation of the Canaanites in the early days of the monarchy. Beyond this everything is uncertain.’* Though many fulfillments of Shem’s dominance over Canaan can be seen, it is more difficult to know when Canaan was subject to Japheth.” [Wenham, 1:202] *The Canaanites thus succeed the Cainites as the curse-laden descendants of the Serpent (3:14-15; 4:11).*

WHY WAS CANAAN CURSED INSTEAD OF HAM? — *Why should Noah have cursed Canaan, Ham’s son, and not Ham himself?* The question has baffled commentators for centuries, from the times of the rabbinical and early Christian commentators to the present, and there is no obvious answer. *While there are multiple theories surrounding this conundrum which are worthy of our consideration, let us first reject those based upon manuscript error and / or Jewish tradition.*

- Rabbi Cassuto [2:153] notes there are those who believe that *the original reading of the text was ‘Ham’ and not ‘Canaan.’* For example, **Rabbi Saadia Gaon** considers that the words *‘cursed be Canaan’* are to be read, *‘cursed be the father of Canaan.’* **Rabbi Koenig** also conjectures that at first Ham was the actual reading of the text, but subsequently the name was changed to conform to the fact that the Canaanites were subjugated by the Israelites. Some versions of the LXX even read *‘Ham.’* But since we believe our text reads as it was originally given to us by Moses, we reject those explanations.
- Rabbi Cassuto [2:153f] also notes other Jewish traditions that *Canaan himself was the transgressor, or at least was an accessory to his father’s iniquity.* According to one of the interpretations in *Bereshith Rabba* 36.7, Canaan saw and told Ham. Other haggadic passages attribute to Canaan the disgraceful act alluded to above. Again, we reject those explanation since there is no textual evidence to support those theories.
- Of the Jewish traditions that teach Noah was castrated, some take the view that *the curse fell on Canaan in accordance with the law of retaliation:* Ham prevented his father from raising up a fourth son, hence his fourth son was cursed. But as we saw in our previous lesson, we do not believe Ham (or Canaan) castrated Noah and thus this explanation has no basis.

In addition to rejecting the previous theories because of our firm belief in the authority of Scripture as received, there is also the fact that the oracle curses Ham’s descendants but blesses the descendants of Shem and Japheth. *If Canaan rather than Ham had been the guilty one, they why was Ham not included in the blessing?* While we may be uncertain as to the why, there is no question the story places the violation on Ham but the curse on Canaan.

Having rejected the theories above, let us now consider those theories worthy of our consideration. Of the numerous solutions that has been proposed, note there may be elements of truth in each of these theories given below:

- **Ham had already been blessed by the Lord (9:1) so Noah could not curse his son Ham** – This explanation is as old as the third century A.D. midrash *Bereshith Rabbah* 36:7, which points out that God had recently pronounced his blessing on Noah and his sons so Noah could not really unsay that promise.

- **The curse on Canaan was a *talionic* penalty; Noah's youngest son Ham sinned against his father, therefore it was appropriate that Ham's youngest son Canaan should be punished for his father's sin** — This is supported by 9:24 where Ham is identified as the '*youngest*' of the three, alongside 10:6 where the natural reading of the verse suggests Canaan was the youngest of Ham's sons. Rabbinic midrash reckoned Canaan to be the fourth and last son of Ham.

- **The blessings / curses on those mentioned have their descendants in view, with the sons of Noah embodying and personifying the character of their descendants.** — No one writing on these blessings / curses deny the blessings on Shem and Japheth look beyond the horizon of Noah's time to the subsequent interactions of their descendants (9:26-27), so it is most likely this curse on Canaan look unto his posterity as well. From Ham descended Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan (10:6). The Canaanites especially were notorious throughout the Old Testament for their aberrant sexual practices, and Lev 18:3 links both Egypt and Canaan as peoples whose habits were abominable: '*You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt ... and ... as they do in the land of Canaan.*' Ham's indiscretion towards his father may easily be seen as a type of the later behavior of the Egyptians and Canaanites. Noah's curse on Canaan thus represents God's sentence on the sins of the Canaanites, which their forefather Ham had exemplified. *Since Noah was one righteous and walked with the Lord, he through the Spirit saw a problem in Ham's character and on the basis of that he delivers an invocation about the future descendants who will live in slavery to such things and then be controlled by others. In a similar way Jacob pronounced oracles about his sons based on their revealed character* (see Gen 49).

OUT OF HAM'S SONS, WHY CANAAN? — Scripture lists four sons of Ham: **Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan** (10:6), so the question naturally arises why Canaan is singled out for the curse from his grandfather Noah. *While it is probable that Noah anticipated in him the evil traits that marked his father Ham*, B. H. Carroll offers an alternative possibility. "The question naturally arises whether that curse extends to the other children of Ham, and if so, why Canaan alone is specified. *My opinion is that the curse extends to the whole of the descendants of Ham from the fact that there was no blessing pronounced on him or any of his children in the whole prophecy, and I think that Canaan was specified instead of the others because Canaan is the one with which God's people will have to do when they go to the Promised Land.*" [Carroll, 1:203]

v. 26 – He also said, 'Blessed be YHWH, the God of Shem; — This is an unusual way to express a blessing; it makes the LORD rather than Shem the object of the blessing. *Of the three oracles, God's personal name YHWH is only used in connection with Shem and his offspring.*

SHEM TO BE THE ELECT LINE — The formula '*blessed be YHWH*' in the Bible connotes thanksgiving and praise to the Lord who performed a beneficent act and would normally continue with an explanation of what the LORD has done which led to the expression of thanks (see, for instance, Gen. 24:27; Exod. 18:10; and so forth). *Here the omission of any specific explanation must mean that Noah is blessing the LORD for being the God of Shem.* The phrase '*the LORD, the God of Shem,*' indeed anticipates many similar expressions in later texts, e.g., '*the LORD, the God of Abraham [your fathers, Israel, etc.]*' (24:27; Exod 3:15; 32:27; 34:23). *This is the first indication that God elects the line of Shem to rule the earth (Gen. 1:26-28) and crush the Serpent (Gen. 3:15; 4:26).* *"The standard-bearers of Shem would be Israel, for whom the primary goal of life is to serve God and increase His glory in the world. Consequently, when*

God is blessed, they, too, are exalted. Though Israel is HASHEM'S most devoted servant, He is the universal God; not only Shem's. He is called the God of Shem in the sense that He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In that He is especially revealed in their history and because they are the ones who recognized and proclaimed His greatness." [Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, 45] "Because Jehovah is the God of Shem, Shem will be the recipient and heir of all the blessings of salvation, which God as Jehovah bestows upon mankind." [Keil, 1:158]

'SHEM' MEANS 'NAME' — Since Shem means 'Name,' there may well be a play on words here; cf. on 27. "Or, 'Jehovah, God of the name,' or 'who preserves the name' [Lange, 1:335]

and let Canaan be his slave. — 'his,' literally, 'to him, to them.' Note the reiteration of the curse on Canaan yet again. The word *lāmô* can signify both 'to him' and 'to them;' but the difference between these two senses does not affect the meaning here, since in any case the reference is not specifically to Noah's son Shem but to his descendants. The same applies to the identical clause that occurs in v. 27 in connection with Japheth.

WHEN WAS THIS FULFILLED? — Commentators are very much divided in their views concerning the actual event or circumstances to which the Bible refers when it speaks of the subjugation of Canaan by Shem and Japheth. At least in part would be the period of the conquest under Joshua, but at no time in the history of Israel was there a complete subjugation of Canaan. Many cities were conquered and at times the Canaanites were enslaved in part, but the Canaanites survived until the final colony at Carthage was destroyed in 146 BC by the Romans.

v. 27 – God enlarge Japheth, — Since the Hebrew word 'japheth' means 'enlarge,' there is a play on words here, *yaph^{et} ... yepheth*, 'may enlarge ... Japheth.' Some understand 'enlarge' in the sense of 'make space for, make wide.' **Here the word has a positive sense: it expresses the hope that God will make Japheth grow or a general wish for success.** Japheth appears as the ancestor of sundry peoples to the west and north of Israel in the Anatolian and Aegean, thus largely (but not exclusively) of Indo-European stock. **It is interesting the sons of Japheth are said to have mainly resided in what we know today as Europe since that word comes from the Greek εὐρώπη [eurōpē] and means 'wide-faced, extensive, spacious.'** [Lange, 1:335]

God — 'Elōhîm. Noah uses God's personal name 'LORD' for his covenant relationship with Shem, but he uses 'Elōhîm for his transcendence over the Japhethites.

and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; – TO WHOM DOES THIS REFER? — While it is possible to mean 'may God dwell in the tents of Shem' and is so understood in the Jewish books of Jubilees and the Targums, it is more likely to refer to Japheth for several reasons: (1) it is hard to construe God's 'dwelling in the tents of Shem' as a blessing to Japheth; (2) the use of the plural 'tents of Shem' suggest a group of people is dwelling among Shem, not a singular God; and (3) if God were the subject of 'dwell,' one might have expected the personal name 'YHWH' to be used as in v. 26. **According to the plain sense of the words, the subject can only be Japheth.** 'To reside in the tents of Shem' is tantamount to declaring that the God of Shem is Japheth's as well. [Wenham, 1:202; Cassuto, 2:169; Mathews, 1:424] **"Their numbers and their territories will be enlarged, so much so that they will share in Shem's territories."** [NET Study Bible, 24]

WHEN WAS THIS FULFILLED? — The fulfilment of the words 'let him dwell in (or among) the tents of Shem' is sought almost in vain in the Old Testament, with Gordon Wenham stating 'we are therefore forced to admit to a certain agnosticism about the primary application of Noah's words.' [Wenham, 1:203] Some suggestions include the united monarchy under David, the

Assyrian or Babylonian conquests, but each of these have problems and are most likely decedents of Ham rather than Japheth. Even later fulfillments have been suggested, e.g., Alexander the Great's conquest of the East in the fourth century, or the adoption of the Greek language by the Jews. *Perhaps the true fulfillment is in the New Testament with the ingathering of the Gentiles (Eph 3:6), predominantly from the west.*

and let Canaan be his slave.' — “‘May Canaan be a slave to him.’ For a third and final time Canaan’s future slavery is predicted. This threefold repetition of the curse makes it unusually emphatic: there can be no doubt about its fulfillment.” [Wenham, 1:203]

Concluding Verses — Death of Noah:

²⁸ And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. ²⁹ So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.’ (Gen 9:28-29 NKJV)

Rabbi Cassuto’s translation:

v. 28 – And Noah lived / after the flood three hundred years / and fifty years.

v. 29 – And all the days of Noah were / nine hundred years / and fifty years; and he died.

v. 28 – And Noah lived — “*Till now the Torah spoke of Noah and his sons together; after this it is the history of the sons of Noah alone that will be related.* Hence these two verses come at this point to bid farewell to Noah and to tell us how he departed from the world. In the same way, the passing of Terah (11:32) is mentioned before the stories about Abraham; so, too, Abraham’s death is recorded before the histories of Ishmael and Isaac, and the death of Isaac (35:28–29) before the narratives of Esau and Jacob.” [Cassuto, 2:170] The wording is almost identical with that employed in chapter 5, differing in two aspects. First the dividing line between the two periods of Noah’s life is not the birth of the first-born son as in chapter 5 but the Deluge, this being the principal event in Noah’s life. Secondly we do not find here the formula ‘*and beget sons and daughters*’ to make it clear that all mankind is descended from Ham, Shem, or Japheth.

after the flood three hundred years and fifty years. — Since the flood began in the 600th year of Noah’s life and finished in the 601st year, evidently ‘flood’ (*mabbûl*) here refers to the first destructive phase of the inundation; otherwise Noah would have been 951 years old at his death, not 950, as v 29 asserts. Within the genealogies of Genesis the flood is the only event used to mark the passage of time apart from human births and deaths.

v. 29 – And all the days of Noah were nine hundred years and fifty years; and he died. — Unlike the Mesopotamian flood hero Utnapishtim who was granted immortality after the flood, Noah suffered the fate of all his ancestors save Enoch. “Noah was born in the year 1056 from Creation, the Flood occurred in 1656, and he died in 2006, ten years after the Dispersion (chapter 11). Abraham was born in 1948; thus he knew Noah and was 58 years old when Noah died. *It is fascinating that from Adam to Abraham, there was a word-of-mouth tradition spanning only four people: Adam, Lemech, Noah, and Abraham. Similarly, Moses, through whom the Torah was given, saw Kehath who saw Jacob, who saw Abraham. Accordingly, there were not more than seven people who carried the tradition firsthand from Adam to the generation that received the Torah.*” [Rabbi Nossan Scherman, *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, 45]