



# NOAH'S NAKEDNESS & HAM'S SIN

GENESIS 9:18-29



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

JOHN SIETZE BERGSMA

jbergsma@sbcglobal.net

Franciscan University of Steubenville, Steubenville, OH 43952

SCOTT WALKER HAHN

shahn@franciscan.edu

Franciscan University of Steubenville, Steubenville, OH 43952

The compressed, elusive narrative of Gen 9:20–27 has been an exegetical puzzle since antiquity.<sup>1</sup> 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?).<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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).

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

## *Noah's Descendants*

<sup>18</sup> The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were <sup>f</sup>Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) <sup>19</sup> These three were the sons of Noah, and <sup>g</sup>from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. <sup>3</sup> <sup>21</sup> He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. <sup>22</sup> And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. <sup>23</sup> Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. <sup>24</sup> When Noah awoke from his wine <sup>h</sup> and knew what his youngest son had done to him, <sup>25</sup> he said,

<sup>i</sup> "Cursed be Canaan;

<sup>j</sup> a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers."

<sup>26</sup> He also said,

"Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem;

and let Canaan be his servant.

<sup>27</sup> May God enlarge Japheth, <sup>4</sup>

and let him dwell in the tents of Shem,

and let Canaan be his servant."

<sup>28</sup> After the flood Noah lived 350 years. <sup>29</sup> All the days of Noah were 950 years, and he died.

# WHAT DID HAM DO?

Voyeurism? Paternal Incest? or  
Something Else?





# Voyeurism

This view suggests that Ham merely saw Noah naked and then ridiculed him in front of Shem and Japheth.

**Problem 1:** There is no indication in Scripture and/or in the ANE context that would suggest merely seeing someone naked was bad—especially not bad enough to warrant a curse.

**Problem 2:** The text does not indicate directly, nor *via* literary device, that Ham made fun of Noah.

**Problem 3:** This view does not take into account the idiomatic phrases “seeing nakedness” and “uncovering nakedness”.



# Paternal Incest

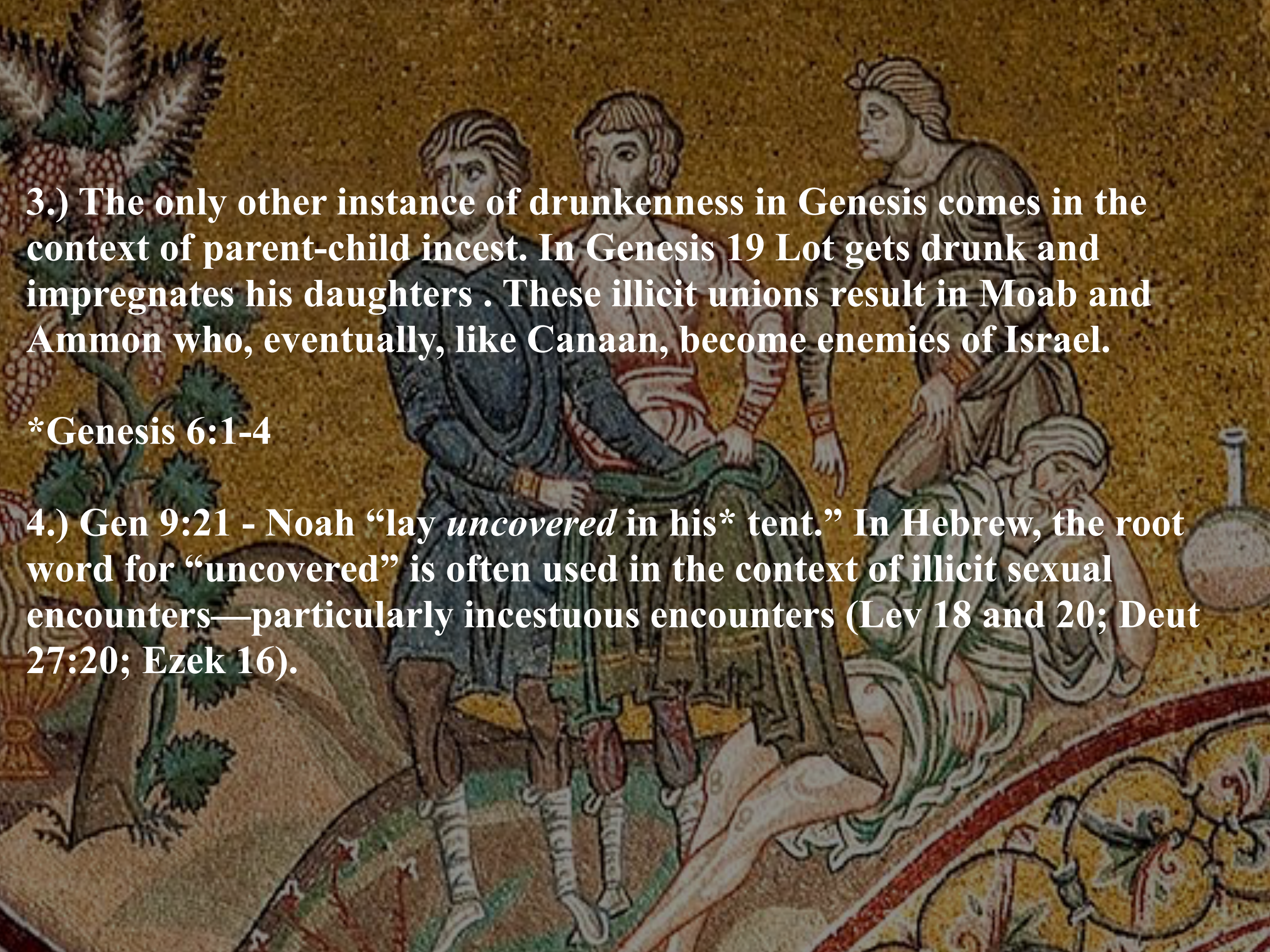
The paternal incest view suggests that Ham had sex with Noah while he was drunk and then told Shem and Japheth about it.

1.) Procreation is an important part of the context of Genesis 9. Noah and his family are twice told to populate the earth (Gen 9:1, 7)—as were Adam and Eve. Verse 19 says they *did* populate the earth.

2.) In the broader biblical context, wine is related to sex.

*“The Song of Songs is replete with images of wine as a symbol of sexuality and—strikingly—the vineyard as a place of lovemaking. 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 would dispense with his scruples and return to enjoy his spouse (2 Sam 11:13).”*





3.) The only other instance of drunkenness in Genesis comes in the context of parent-child incest. In Genesis 19 Lot gets drunk and impregnates his daughters . These illicit unions result in Moab and Ammon who, eventually, like Canaan, become enemies of Israel.

\*Genesis 6:1-4

4.) Gen 9:21 - Noah “lay *uncovered* in his\* tent.” In Hebrew, the root word for “uncovered” is often used in the context of illicit sexual encounters—particularly incestuous encounters (Lev 18 and 20; Deut 27:20; Ezek 16).



5.) The phrases “to see one’s nakedness” and “to uncover one’s nakedness” are equivalent and mean “to have sexual intercourse with”.

Lev 20:17 (ESV) “ 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, and he shall bear his iniquity.”

Ezek 16:35-38 (ESV) “Therefore, O Prostitute, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated...and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.”

These considerations have lead many scholars to abandon the voyeuristic interpretation in favor of the paternal incest view. They conclude that an incestuous, homosexual act took place between Noah and Ham.



# The Argument

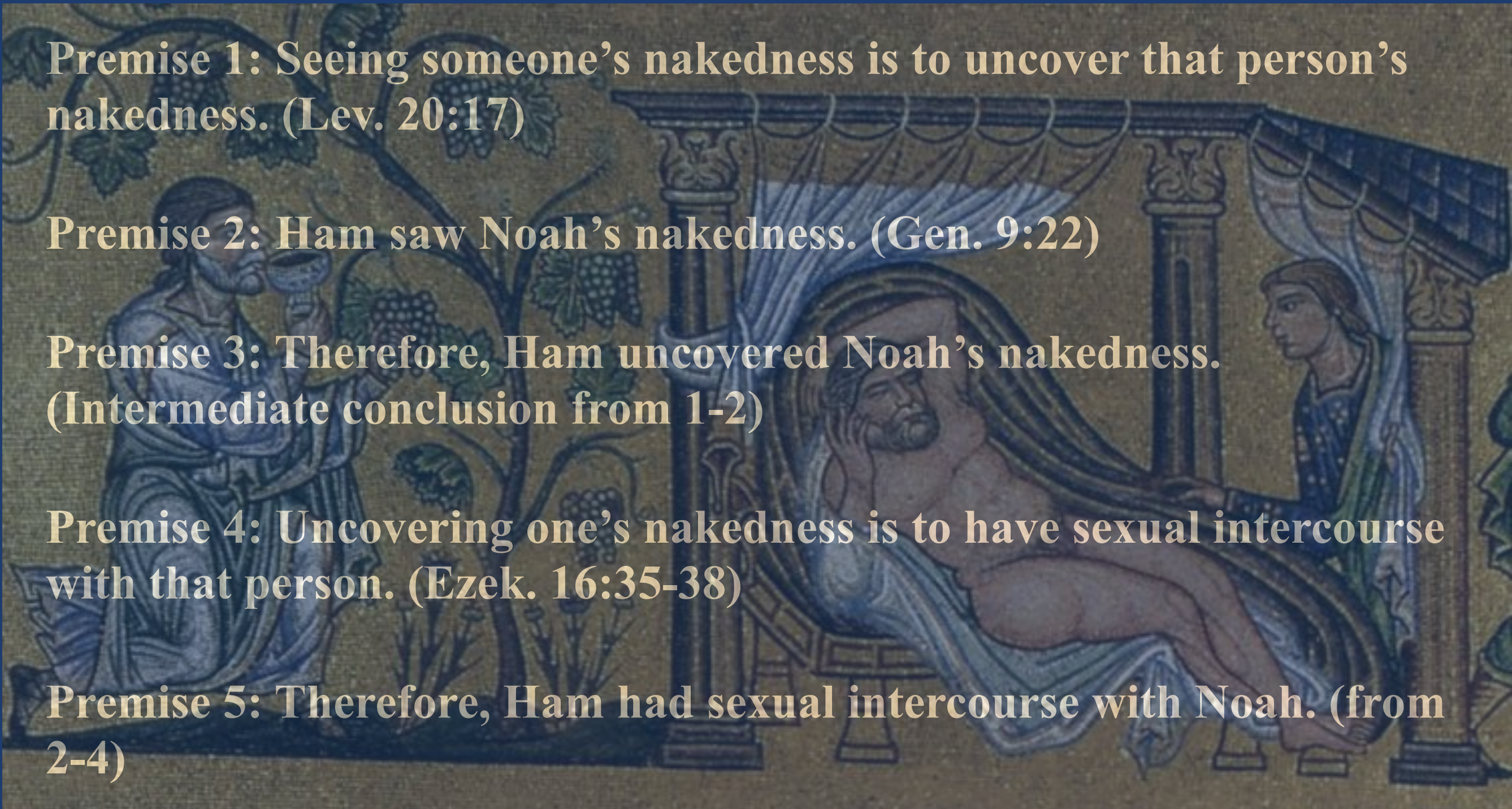
**Premise 1: Seeing someone's nakedness is to uncover that person's nakedness. (Lev. 20:17)**

**Premise 2: Ham saw Noah's nakedness. (Gen. 9:22)**

**Premise 3: Therefore, Ham uncovered Noah's nakedness. (Intermediate conclusion from 1-2)**

**Premise 4: Uncovering one's nakedness is to have sexual intercourse with that person. (Ezek. 16:35-38)**

**Premise 5: Therefore, Ham had sexual intercourse with Noah. (from 2-4)**





## The Maternal Incest View

This view says that Ham had sex with his mother (or, Noah's wife) and, in so doing, attempted to disgrace and usurp Noah's headship.

‘Uncover nakedness’ is almost always used to refer to a heterosexual, sexual union. Further, to uncover your father's nakedness is to have sex with his wife.

Deut 27:20 (ESV) “Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's nakedness.”

Deut 22:30 (ESV) “A man shall not take his father's wife, so that he does not uncover his father's nakedness.”

Lev 18:6-8 (ESV) “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother... You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.”



# LEV. 18:1-8 (ESV)

## *Unlawful Sexual Relations*

**18** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, <sup>q</sup> I am the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> <sup>r</sup> You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and <sup>s</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> <sup>t</sup> You shall follow my rules <sup>1</sup> and keep my statutes and walk in them. <sup>q</sup> I am the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> <sup>t</sup> You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; <sup>u</sup> if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> “None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. <sup>7</sup> <sup>v</sup> You 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. <sup>8</sup> <sup>w</sup> You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness. <sup>9</sup> <sup>x</sup> You shall not



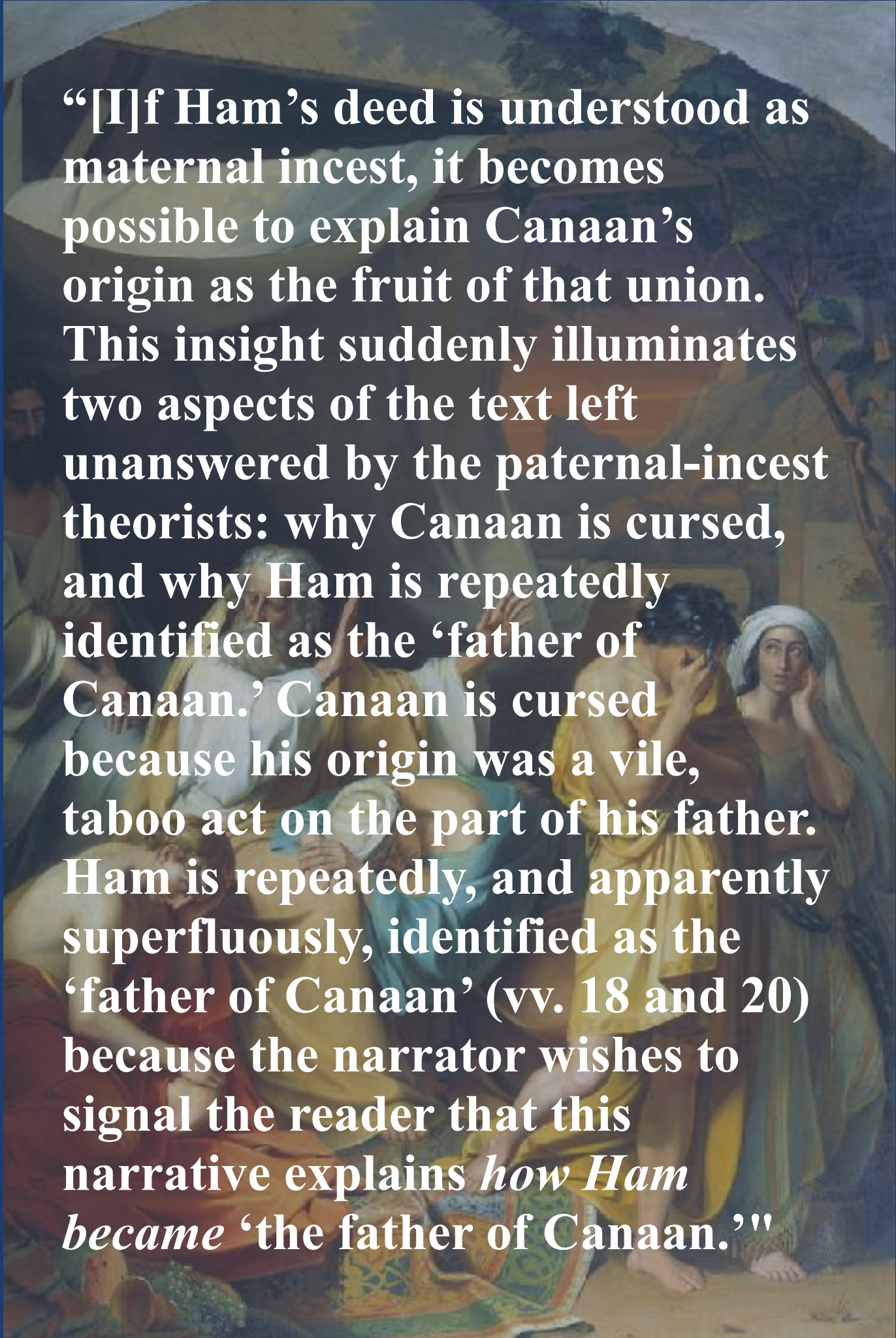
## VIRTUES OF THE THEORY

1.) It accounts for the idiomatic use of ‘see nakedness’ and ‘uncover nakedness’.

2.) It applies those phrases rightly. That is, it uses them to refer to an incestuous heterosexual union—consistent w/ the usage in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, etc.

3.) It provides an explanation for the curse on Canaan rather than Ham. Canaan is the offspring of the illicit union.

4.) It accounts for the seemingly superfluous repetition of ‘Ham was the father of Canaan’. The other brothers are not spoken of this way in Genesis 9.



**“[I]f 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 the 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.’”**