

Exegetical Brief: Genesis 9:27 Who Will Live In The Tents Of Shem?

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The concluding portion of the biblical account of Noah's life (Gn 9:20-29) does not begin auspiciously. Noah became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Things got even worse when Noah's son Ham viewed his father's nakedness and quickly reported what he saw to his brothers, Shem and Japheth. From that point, however, the Bible reports noticeable improvements in subsequent events. Shem and Japheth demonstrate restraint and respectful decorum in covering their father's nakedness. Noah, presumably repentant and clearly sober, then utters significant and memorable predictions that are expressed as curses and blessings for descendants of his sons (Gn 9:25-27). The Noachian prophecies, particularly the concluding section, are the primary focus of this study.

A question frequently asked is whether the patriarch's words express a wish that the people mentioned be cursed or blessed, or whether they constitute more of a prediction that reveals what would subsequently unfold as history. In other words, is it preferable to translate his initial words in verse 25, "Cursed *be* Canaan" or "Cursed *is* Canaan?" Grammatically, the regular Hebrew imperfect form used in verse 25 (יִהְיֶה) does not necessarily indicate an optative or jussive thrust, but the shortened or jussive forms in verses 26 and 27 (יִהְיֶה, תִּפְּחֶן, וְיִהְיֶה) do. Ultimately, in this context, the meaning does not depend on whether regular or jussive form is used. While not explicitly stated, Noah's words obviously carry divine authority and accuracy. What he sees and says is something prophetically envisioned and proclaimed as eventual history even if expressed as a request or wish.

Another question invariably asked has to do with the cursing of Canaan, the declaration that he be the most abject slave ("servant of servants") to his brothers. Why is the curse placed on Canaan rather than on his father Ham, as one would expect? While no answer is provided in the text itself, Bible students with a grasp on the subsequently revealed characteristics and activities of the Canaanites have little trouble drawing a conclusion. The words anticipate sordid and shameful behavior on the part of this strand in Ham's family line that resembled the distasteful conduct of Ham himself when he reacted to his father's nakedness. Noah thus prophetically envisions the wickedness of Canaan's descendants along with the judgment that would accompany it. In the wider context of Scripture these words indict the morally polluted Canaanite peoples and place their destruction or enslavement by Semitic Israel into this context of moral pollution. In this connection we also do well to notice that Noah says nothing at all about the other Hamitic peoples who would descend from Cush, Mizraim, or Put. The notion that blacks are here cursed and destined to perpetual servitude is also biblically baseless. The progeny of Canaan (Gn 10:15-18) were found in the familiar Canaanite tribes and the Phoenicians. After the downfall and dispersion of the Phoenician Carthaginians, our ability to trace Canaanites as distinguishable ethnic groups is gone.

Noah's words then pronounce blessing on Shem and Japheth. The initial words of benediction in verse 26 are somewhat surprising since they declare the blessedness of "the Lord, the God of Shem" in addition to the favored status of Shem himself over against Canaan. The Lord and Shem are thus linked in an inseparable and distinctive manner when future blessedness is envisioned. With regard to the blessing of Japheth (verse 27), the words speak of enlargement with a play on words that key off Japheth's name (יִפְּחֶן אֶלְלֵהִים לְיָפֶֿתֿ). Whether this speaks of an enlargement of territory, influence, or affluence is not stated, but the context points primarily to an enlargement and enjoyment of a spiritual bounty alongside the descendants of Shem and because of the latter's distinct relation with "the Lord, the God of Shem."

What Noah said next has been debated through the centuries and serves as our central focus at this time. Right after saying, "May God enlarge Japheth," Noah utters the words, "and may he dwell in the tents of Shem" (וְיִשְׁכֵּן בְּאֶֿתֶּֿרֶם הֵֿלִי־שֵׁם). The question is, "Who is to live or dwell in Shem's tents, Japheth or God? Grammatically, either Japheth or God can be the subject of the verb, so discussions to resolve the issue must focus primarily on the context and progression of thought.

Japheth Will Dwell in the Tents of Shem

Those who maintain that Japheth is the subject of the verb may constitute the majority of commentators, at least since the time of the Reformation. Among them are the NIV translators, who insert Japheth's name into the text and do not even offer a footnote to alert the reader to the alternative interpretation.

Scholars who take this position point to the overall structure of the Noachian prediction. Since the refrain in verses 26 and 27, "May Canaan be slave," is essentially unchanged and the verses largely parallel in emphasis, one might expect that verse 27 in its entirety applies to Japheth just as all of verse 26 deals with Shem. An additional argument based on the immediate context states that since both Shem and Japheth acted concertedly to resist Ham's apparently lewd conduct, one would expect parallel and corresponding blessings to be shared by them. Having Japheth living harmoniously in the tents of Shem is expressive of such shared benefits. Yet another reason advanced by this school of thought is that the plural "tents" is awkward when used to describe God's dwelling place. Parallel passages invariably speak of God's "tent" or "dwelling place" at one locale, as at the tabernacle or on his holy hill, Zion.

The meaning of the clause, if translated "May Japheth live in the tents of Shem," seems to carry the idea of sharing the brother's hospitality and hence also distinctive blessings the brother might possess. Traditionally the emphasis has been on how the Japhethites (largely Indo-Europeans) would actively share or participate in the spiritual blessings of the Shemites, the blessings derived from and through "the Lord, the God of Shem." The influx of Gentiles into the New Testament church is central to this concept, of course. Some have also included a linguistic aspect in this, stressing that the language of the New Testament is the language of Javan (Greece) that has entered into the tents of Shem. That is, the gospel was preached in Greek also among Semitic Israel. Those who prefer to see Japheth in this clause but who are less inclined to find here any reference to the Messiah are quick to point to socio-political movements in history. The conquest of Palestine and subjugation of Canaanite tribes by Semitic Israel are said to be depicted, and the peaceful cohabitation of Anatolian or Aegean Japhethites with Semitic peoples is highlighted. Some have identified the Philistines as descendants of Japheth who carved out their own niche in Canaanite territory and thus lived in Shem's tents, although others hesitate to attribute Indo-European ancestry to the mysterious Philistines.

God Will Dwell in the Tents of Shem

The conviction that the transition should be "May God dwell in the tents of Shem" has a longer history than the alternative. Most ancient Hebrew sources firmly place God as the subject, and as often as not link the words to the divine *shekinah* ("dwelling") abiding and revealing itself among the Israelites. Prominent Christian scholars concur with this meaning and advance reasons parallel to those offered by those who take the other position. For example, they also point to the structure of this poetic section of text and argue thus: the heptastich (seven poetic lines) in verses 25-27 is subdivided into three parts with the curse on Canaan as the refrain. In the first part, a distich (two lines), only Canaan appears. "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers." In the second part, also a distich, Canaan and Shem appear. "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem." In the third part, a tristich, all three sons appear. "May God extend the territory of Japheth; may he live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave." This symmetrical progression of thought justifies making God the subject of the verb ("dwell") in the second of the three lines, since Shem is being talked about, and a second statement about Japheth in this section would be out of place. A similar contextual argument observes that Shem is blessed in the prior distich (v. 26) and the Lord is identified as having a special relationship to him. Thus it would be most natural that this distinctive relationship be explained or clarified, and the information here provided about God taking up residence somewhere in or among the Shemites would be this clarification.

Those who advocate the interpretation of God's dwelling in the tents of Shem also advance an argument based more on grammar or syntax than on context. Some have held that in the Hebrew language the subject of a

previous clause ("May God enlarge Japheth") is presumed to continue as subject in the next clause when the subject is not expressed ("and may he live in Shem's tents"). This syntactic principle sounds plausible and helpful, but it must be conceded that even if this is allowed as a general rule, exceptions to it are common. Genesis 15:6, 16:6b, and 40:4, for example, offer examples of how objects (not subjects) in one clause clearly become the subjects of a subsequent clause without the shift of subject being expressly indicated. It is the immediate contexts which require such shift of subjects.

Those who see the verse predicting that God will reside in Shem's tents are fully aware that they advocate a startling idea. How might the transcendent God dwell among the Semitic people? Subsequent revelation enlarged on the idea of God dwelling among his people, particularly with reference to the Lord dwelling among them in the tabernacle (often called **הֵקֵל**, as e.g., in Ex 25:9). The ultimate reality of God dwelling among his people is observed in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, through and among the Semitic nation of Israel. "The Word became flesh and lived [**ἐσκήνωσεν**, tented] among us" (John 1:14).

It was noted earlier that the precise meaning of this particular text is elusive precisely because its grammatical and syntactical construction is ambiguous. Context must cast the determinative vote regarding meaning, or the meaning must be left as a matter of opinion. This writer is of the opinion that the verse makes more sense when Japheth is viewed as the subject of "dwell." This progression of thought, that Japheth's bounty be enlarged, that he share the blessings channeled by the covenant Lord through Shem, and that Canaan be subject to him, flows well. Two additional factors, while not determinative, have also proved influential: (1) The plural, tents, seems to suggest a group dwelling; and (2) elsewhere in the Old Testament **הֵקֵל** but not **אֶלֶּהִים** serves as the subject of **שָׁכַן**, to dwell, when describing the abiding presence of the Lord God among his people. Ultimately, every student who undertakes a personal study of this exegetical question will be enriched while considering the two possible translations. The theological content of both interpretations is biblical and edifying.