

Why We Keep Getting the Curse of Canaan Wrong

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Most interpreters of Genesis 9:18–29 read with a presumption that Noah’s curse must be justified and that Ham, Canaan, or the Canaanites therefore deserve punishment. Examining problems with this pervasive “presumption of Canaanite guilt” opens alternative readings of Noah’s curse as drunken, excessive, misdirected, or unjust and helps resist its continued weaponization.

See also: [*The Injustice of Noah’s Curse*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2025)

Introduction

In Genesis 9:18–29, Noah, the ark builder famously declared righteous before God’s flood (Genesis 6:9), has a final post-flood episode narrated about him. Noah plants a vineyard, gets drunk, and strips naked in his tent before one of his sons, Ham, “sees his father’s nakedness.” Ham tells Noah’s other two sons who cover their father without looking. Curiously, when Noah awakens, he utters a curse against Canaan, a son of Ham who has done nothing at all in the story. He also blesses Ham’s brothers. Then, the narrator tells us of Noah’s death.

This story, and its thrice-repeated curse that Canaan shall be “a slave of slaves to his brothers,” interests today’s interpreters because it is both strange and historically consequential. Its strangeness involves questions about justice: is Noah righteous here? does Ham’s action (or lack thereof) deserve a curse of slavery? why target Canaan? and where is God in all of this? Consequences of interpreting and applying the passage to life have been devastating. For centuries readers have used Noah’s curse to explain or justify antipathy toward or oppression of some contemporary group they associate with the curse. The most infamous example is in applying the curse to Black people (Goldenberg 2017).

Thankfully, since the 1980s, it has become standard practice for reputable commentaries and essays on this text to denounce its racist weaponization while outlining its problematic history of consequences or using the best tools of critical scholarship to articulate its meaning (Knust 2014, 402). Outside the halls of academia, even the Southern Baptist Convention, which was founded in 1845 out of a desire to uphold ongoing enslavement of Black people (as if divinely ordained), has an official statement denouncing its past racist interpretation of the passage (“On Renouncing the Doctrine of the ‘Curse of Ham’ as a Justification for Racism,” 2018). Thus, it may appear the problem is fixed. Nevertheless, I argue that we are still in a rut when it comes to interpreting Noah’s curse.

There are several ways in which we continue to get the curse of Canaan wrong. A few scholars (Carr 2021, 288–89; Knust 2014, 406; Martin 2009, 22; Reed 2025, 259n28) have commented on the ongoing problem of weaponizing this text against queer folk (Gagnon 2001, 63–71; Robertson 2002, 121). Another problem is today’s interpreters misunderstanding the past racist interpretations that we are trying to debunk.¹ Some have argued that the story is inherently

¹ For example, note that Charles Copher accurately distinguishes between several competing nineteenth-century racist interpretations about Ham (and even Cain) in relation to the origins of Black and White people (Copher 1989).

problematic and, when we don't fundamentally reject its logic, our interpretations are ripe with the potential to be weaponized against someone else (Knust 2014, 389; Sadler 2010, 73). These are major issues related to the consequences of interpretation, and they deserve to be explored in depth. In the short space of this article, however, I would like to focus on one fundamental issue that too few readers have noticed.

Most interpreters follow a strongly held presumption that has been fundamentally problematic. In this article, I explain the presumption and why it is problematic. Then, I share examples of what happens when interpreters break free from this standard presumption.

What Is the Guiding Presumption?

A typical first response of readers is to question the seeming injustice of Noah's curse: "Noah overacted" and "the curse fell not upon the offender," William McKee Evans says (Evans 1980, 15). The next move we see is interpreters looking for a sort of "magic bullet." If you could only understand a phrase, a detail, or a context, then you would see that Noah has neither overreacted nor missed the mark.

This search for the magic bullet comes in many forms. Interpreters assert that Ham laughed at, mocked, or castrated Noah; he sexually abused his father or his mother; or he produced a child with his mother (whether through rape or consensually). Maybe Canaan is the one that actually committed a crime. The story has been edited so we are now missing the juicy details of what really happened. Perhaps, we are so far removed in time and culture, that we do not understand how big a deal it was to see your father naked. It's a prophecy, not a curse; and Canaanites will be punished for acting like Ham, not because of what Ham did (Reed 2025, 223–27). The list could go on and on.

Interpretation, in this search for the magic bullet, becomes a debate over which detail or context is the most convincing. The way that Jennifer Wright Knust describes it, this story "invites readers to join in a game of fill-in-the-blank as they seek to identify Ham's sin, explain Canaan's curse, and account for the eternal stickiness of patriarchal disfavor on some collection of ill-fated kin" (Knust 2014, 389). Knust does not want to play the "game," so she opts out; she is critical of the text, and she is open to retelling the story differently. But I argue that the text is not the source of this invitation to play fill-in-the-blank. The seeming injustice of Noah's curse only guides us to search for the magic bullet when we approach the text with certain presumptions.

A presumption is some idea or disposition that the interpreter starts with before looking at the evidence. Unlike an assumption, a presumption should have some rationale behind it. Whenever anyone interprets the Bible, we start with an idea of the proper context—theologically or historically or literarily, etc.—for approaching the text. The context that we choose influences what presumptions we bring to the passage. Then, we interpret the text in light of those presumptions. In other words, it is inevitable that we read informed by presumptions. Thus, having presumptions is not a problem in and of itself.

The problem is how we have read Noah's curse of Canaan based on a specific but malleable presumption that has grown out of several different contexts and foundational beliefs.

But Wongi Park, more recently, conflates such differences, which leads to misattributing racist ideas and offering questionable solutions (Park 2021).

The problematic presumption is what I call a presumption of Canaanite guilt, and it is a belief that some guilty party deserves and receives Noah's severe reaction. Mark Brett succinctly expresses this presumption that we start with, "the reader is expected to see the curse of slavery as justifiable" (Brett 2000, 46).

I use the term "Canaanite" to describe the presumption because biblical interpretation for today's scholars most often focuses on Noah's curse as justifiable for the Canaanites. However, the presumption continues to be applied to Ham or Canaan as individuals, all of Ham's descendants, or some other group they are supposedly connected to.

The presumption of Canaanite guilt is everywhere. Next time that you read a Genesis commentary, an essay on this passage, or any interpretation, ask yourself, "does this interpreter start with the presumption that the curse must be justifiable?" They usually do.

Why Is It Problematic?

If the presumption of Canaanite guilt is as prevalent as I claim it is, then why is it problematic rather than the most reasonable starting point that discerning researchers have agreed upon? Some of the problems with this presumption include the foundations for why readers adopt it, the problems it causes en route to solving others, that it leads interpreters away from readings that would better fit their own theological project, and that it is adopted without explaining its strengths over another presumption. All of this is addressed in my monograph (Reed 2025), but in keeping this article brief, I will focus on the latter two problems.

It might be obvious that self-interested readers of the past would take a curse of slavery and start with a presumption that it applies to some of their contemporaries whom the ideologue would like to condemn. In short, the presumption of Canaanite guilt fits well with their goal of weaponizing the text. What is more surprising, however, is that today's scholars often follow a presumption of Canaanite guilt even when it leads to interpretations that do not fit well with their larger interpretive project. Two examples can do well at illustrating this practice.

First, look at the following illustrations that provide a visual aid to Genesis 1–11 in a video interpretation by Tim Mackie, biblical scholar and creator of the popular online resource BibleProject (2014, 2015; Mackie, n.d., 117–21; Reed 2025, 131–37).

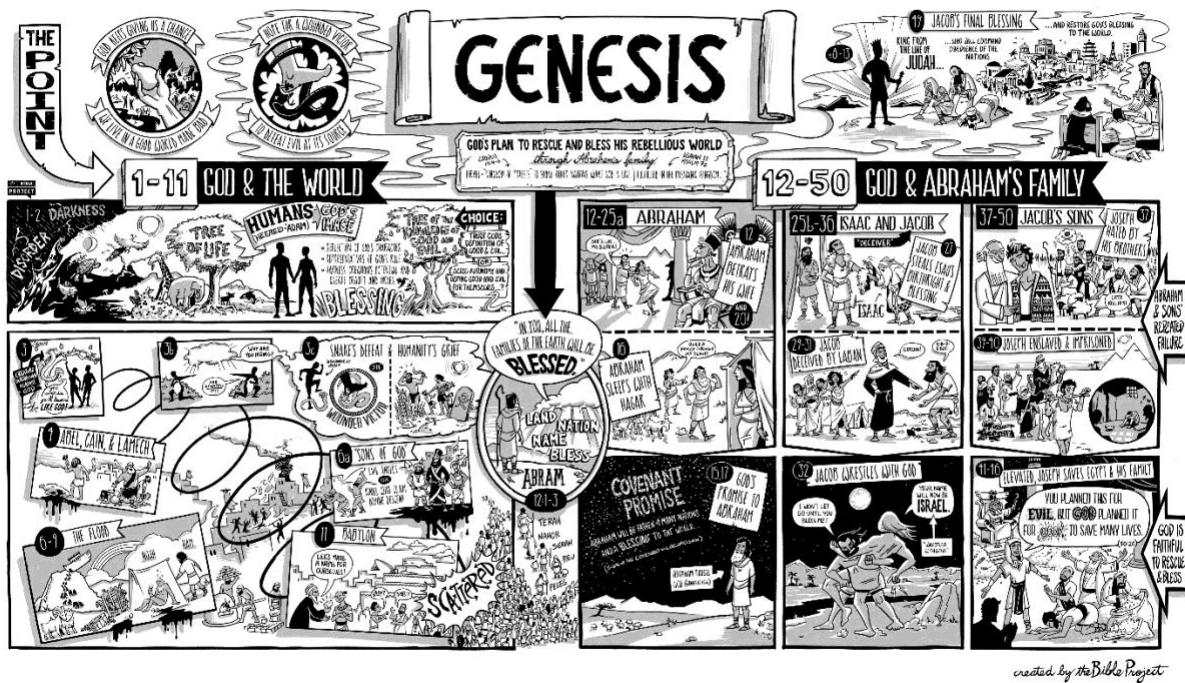


Figure 1: BibleProject. n.d. *Genesis Overview Poster*. <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-genesis/#more-resources>. Direct link: https://d1bsmz3sdiplr.cloudfront.net/media/Posters%20Download/01-02%20Genesis_FNL.jpg.

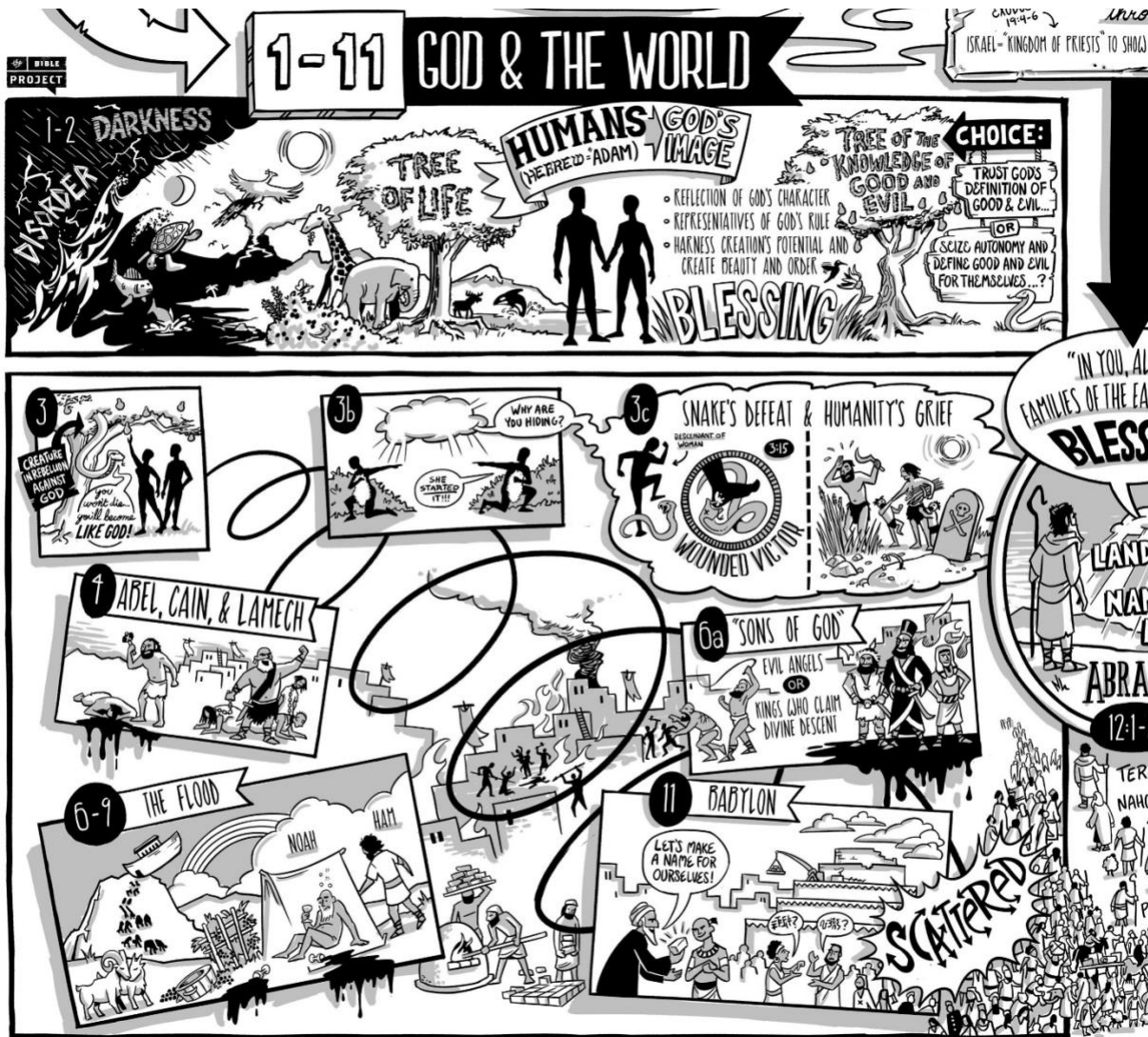


Figure 2: BibleProject. n.d. Zoomed-in view of *Genesis Overview Poster*.

<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-genesis/#more-resources>. Direct link:

https://d1bsmz3sdihlpr.cloudfront.net/media/Posters%20Download/01-02%20Genesis_FNL.jpg.

In the broader illustration of Genesis as a whole, Mackie explains the theme is “God’s plan to rescue and bless his rebellious world.” However, the first eleven chapters show a downward spiral of humans continually choosing rebellion while “God keeps giving us a chance”; then, the patriarchal narratives show God’s work through Abraham and his descendants to bless “all the families of the Earth.”

In the second illustration, we can see how Noah’s curse of Canaan fits with this overall theme. In the top register, Genesis 1–2 demonstrates the good world God has created as well as the choice (on the far right) that God places before all humans: “trust God’s definition of good and evil . . . or seize autonomy and define good and evil for themselves . . . ?” Below that, Mackie frames all the examples of wrongdoing in the opening chapters of Genesis as repeated instances in which humans have sinned by creating and following their own definition of good and evil apart from God. In other words, the wrongdoing that people commit in these chapters

should not be merely understood as actions that are obviously wrong in and of themselves, but actions that are wrong precisely because they fit this consistent theme.

Viewed through this perspective, Genesis 9:18–29 occurs in the lower left as part of the larger scene that includes salvation from the flood. In the video Mackie explains:

But he [God] protects one blameless human—Noah, and his family. And he commissions him as a new “Adam.” He repeats the divine blessing and commissions him to go out into the world. And so, our hopes are really high, but then Noah fails too, and also in a garden. He goes and he plants a vineyard, and he gets drunk out of his mind. And then one of his sons, Ham, does something shameful to his father in the tent. And so, here we have our new “Adam,” naked and ashamed, just like the first. And the downward spiral begins again (BibleProject 2015).

Mackie’s summary makes no mention of the curse here. Although he mentions Noah’s failure, it has nothing to do with the curse as part of Noah’s wrongdoing. Presuming that the curse is just, Mackie points out Noah’s drunkenness and naked shame as problematically similar to Adam. He vaguely refers to Ham doing “something shameful.” But he does not explain how any of this fits with humans “seiz[ing] autonomy to define good and evil for themselves.”

In other media, Mackie goes much further in the ways that the presumption of Canaanite guilt guides his interpretation. For example, in an interface called *BibleProject Classroom*, a 28-session course on “Noah to Abraham” allows for a much more in-depth exploration of this passage, and when it comes to Genesis 9:22, Mackie focuses heavily on Ham’s deed as the main wrongdoing. Although he asserts that the text is polyvalent (meaning it can be read to say multiple things at the same time), Mackie insists that whatever one reads it to be saying should emphasize Ham’s sick belief that grasping for power through sexual violence is “good.” Thus, humanity, in Ham, has chosen to reject God’s definition of good and seized autonomy to perversely define it apart from God (*Session 23 [Noah to Abraham]*, n.d.; Mackie, n.d., 119–21). While he has critiques for Noah, Mackie emphasizes that Noah’s failure is mere “folly,” and that it is “a moral failure as opposed to a rebellion.” Ham, however, has committed “the rebellion of Cain in the heinous act that divides the brotherhood,” and he chooses “(like Cain) his own destructive path that will ruin his family” (Mackie, n.d., 117–18). Mackie goes on to explain how the curse does not apply to all of Ham’s descendants or even all Canaanites, but only the descendants of Canaan who choose, with their actions, to join the cursed lineage. They are punished for their own wrongdoing, and there are some Canaanites who escape this punishment by choosing to join the Israelites (*Session 23 [Noah to Abraham]*, n.d.; *Session 24 [Noah to Abraham]*, n.d.).

It seems to me that Mackie has missed an opportunity to see the most obvious connection to his overall theology. If the overarching problem is people seizing “autonomy to define good and evil for themselves,” wouldn’t it make sense to critique Noah’s curse as unjust? When observing that Noah wakes up from being “drunk out of his mind” (Mackie’s words, not mine) and pronounces a curse that distinguishes which of his descendants deserve good and which deserve evil, it would seem a natural place to point out that Noah has missed the mark and overreacted. For the sake of his own larger theological picture, I would think that Mackie would want to show how Noah, “a new Adam,” is infringing on God’s authority to define good and evil and doing a poor job. This would free Mackie to disregard Noah’s curse which, in his interpretation, already has no power (since each Canaanite’s fate is based on their own choices).

Instead, the presumption of Canaanite guilt has led him to focus on Ham as the wrongdoer and Canaanites—or only certain Canaanites—as deserving the curse.

In another example, the interpreter's advocacy for the oppressed makes the presumption of Canaanite guilt even more conspicuous. In Miguel de la Torre's Genesis commentary for the *Belief* series, he starts by stating a central presumption that guides all of his reading. He says that he purposely reads Genesis "from the margins," that is, from the perspectives of the "disenfranchised and dispossessed" (de la Torre 2011, xv). This is not mere lip-service. When reading the story of Eden, de la Torre is sure to point out that the serpent should not be interpreted, following the traditional reading, as Satan or evil incarnate. He advocates for Eve by showing that her motivations for eating the fruit are not wholly misguided. In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, de la Torre goes against the callous critiques that so commonly toss aside the woman who turned into salt; we should have compassion for Lot's wife and her very human reaction to her circumstance. Afterward, Lot's daughters get their father drunk so that they can rape him. Obviously, this is wrong, but we should at least understand how their actions could be a product of the evils of patriarchy and an unfortunately misguided myopia, de la Torre says. Similarly, when Potiphar's wife continually makes sexual advances toward Joseph, we should at least understand the hypocritical double standards of patriarchy that are a part of her context (de la Torre 2011, 64–80, 198–205, 314–20).

One would expect some similar advocacy to counteract the widespread tradition of villainizing Ham or Canaan, but a presumption of Canaanite guilt prevents de la Torre from doing so. To his credit, de la Torre advocates for Canaan insofar as he argues that Canaan should not have been punished when it was Ham who acted (de la Torre 2011, 127–28, 132–33). Nevertheless, de la Torre does not take this as a point of departure to explore the injustice of Noah's curse. Instead, he decides to "join in a game of fill-in-the-blank" by seeking to explain how Ham's deed must have been grave enough to merit Noah's severe reaction (de la Torre 2011, 125–27). I do not think the text guides him to do so, but rather the prevalence of the presumption of Canaanite guilt (which in this case is about Ham's guilt) leads him to focus on Ham's deed even when he ultimately cannot decide what exactly the wrongdoing was.

Mackie, de la Torre, and hundreds of other interpreters follow the presumption of Canaanite guilt without awareness of how it influences their interpretation. When it comes to biblical exegesis, a standard practice is for interpreters to establish the strength of their reading by showing its merits in contrast to other possibilities. While it is normal for the same to happen in interpretations of Noah's curse of Canaan, the presumption of Canaanite guilt stops them from considering or arguing against injustice interpretations. Thus, the problem is not that most interpreters have been objectively wrong in their interpretation, but that they have only explored the validity of their reading amongst a constrained set of possibilities.

Other Possibilities

In my monograph, I analyze hundreds of interpretations of Noah's curse and find that a very small percentage conclude that Noah's curse is mean and misdirected. While I cannot write much to summarize each of the interpretations that breaks from the presumption of Canaanite guilt, the following paragraphs group them into a few categories and invite readers to explore any of them more deeply.

I am only aware of four biblical scholars that offer an in-depth argument that the injustice of Noah's curse makes sense in its literary context. My own dissertation and recent book make

up the most extended argument. I see Noah's actions as an ironic recurrence of the events in Eden, and the injustice of Noah's curse plays a crucial role in this ironic depiction and the overall context of the early chapters of Genesis (Reed 2020, 2025). In the same year as my book, Matthew Schlimm published an academic article (Schlimm 2025b) and a public-facing article (Schlimm 2025a) that foreground a tradition of African American interpreters who, in fighting the weaponization of Noah's curse, emphasize that Noah's words are drunken ramblings. Several points relating to the injustice of Noah's curse substantiate his argument that Noah is still drunk while speaking the curse and blessings. In two articles by George Ogalo (Ogalo 2023a, 2023b), Ham has not committed any moral wrongdoing. While Ham's telling his siblings helped them respond in a positive way to their father's nakedness, Noah deserves some blame for the way his charged emotions (perhaps his shame) compel him toward an inappropriate curse. Finally, David M. Carr's Genesis commentary resists justifying the curse by arguing, instead, that this curse is from "an implicitly hungover and recently drunk patriarch" in an instance where "it is not clear how Ham could have avoided 'seeing' Noah's nakedness or how his brothers could have acted the [honorable] way they did without being alerted by Ham of their father's condition" (Carr 2021, 287). According to Carr, Ham should have covered his father, but Noah overreacted. This is a complex tale of familial breakdown, not a simple account of crime and punishment.

Barnabé Assohoto, a theologian, and Samuel Ngewa, a biblical scholar, include a few pages in the *Africa Bible Commentary* offering a theological lesson based on the injustice of Noah's curse. They focus on alcohol and anger as the problems that led Noah to spew an impetuous curse at innocent Canaan. Significantly, in a break from other scholars who cite Canaanite depravity as the reason God punishes them with genocide (cf. Leviticus 18; Deuteronomy 20:16–18), Assohoto and Ngewa put blame on Noah and the injustice of his curse. They surmise "that the words of rejection and exclusion pronounced by his grandfather aroused scorn and rebellion in Canaan, leading him and his descendants to become distanced from God." Readers, therefore, should learn prudent restraint from the negative example of Noah (Assohoto and Ngewa 2006, 24–26).

Some biblical scholars have written tantalizingly brief notes on injustice (in a few sentences to a page). More tentative speculation comes with concluding how we "might" see the curse as "an excessive reaction by Noah" (Warner 2018, 88n81) or about the "possibility" that flawed Noah has uttered "a mistaken curse, which, like a mistaken blessing, once made cannot be revoked" (Polliack and Zawanowska 2014, 125). A more forceful assertion of the curse being unjust comes from Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who critiques the problems that the curse brings into the world, says Noah's words are "mean and misdirected," and speculates that the narrator might have written an unjust curse as the climax of Noah's downfall "precisely because he [the author] does not approve of otherizing the Canaanites" (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 205). Rodney Sadler asserts the opposite: the biblical author wanted to otherize the Canaanites. Nevertheless, Sadler says they undermine their own intentions because, "It is a curse uttered by a drunken father against the wrong offspring for an offense that is not clearly explicated, which really is void of God's sanction or any sense of moral standing" (Sadler 2014, 101).

A few writings by those outside the guild of biblical scholars deserve attention for how they treat Noah's curse as unjust. Evans (mentioned above) asserts that an unjust curse makes sense in the genre of sacred myths where semidivine beings do deeds that would be immoral for mortals (Evans 1980, 16). Carol Ochs, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, contributed to *The Torah: a Women's Commentary* with a focus on the power of language in the opening chapters of Genesis and a harsh critique of Noah for his rash curse—his first words!—that differentiates love

in the human family, blesses certain sons through degradation of another, and does not pronounce justice (Ochs 2008, 55–56). Dennis Prager justifies the magnitude of the curse but insists it is unjustly misdirected. Along with the story of Lot and his daughters, this teaches a lesson about the dangers of excessive drinking (Prager 2019, 135). Marilynne Robinson, an award-winning novelist with a Ph.D. in English, advocates for Ham and concludes that Noah’s arbitrary and cruel “curse was an error and an injustice” similar to Lamech’s warped sense of justice (Genesis 4:18, 23–24) (Robinson 2024, 67–70).

In some cases, interpreters say that recognizing that the Bible has an unjust curse teaches readers what to reject. Perhaps the earliest example comes in a posthumous letter by eighteenth-century philosopher Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke. Being able to see the injustice of Noah’s curse helps prove that the Bible is a very unhelpful resource for studying history and, therefore, we should reject the Bible as a historical source (Bolingbroke 1841, 209–10; Whitford 2009, 147–48). More recent writers have different ways of saying we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. A popular writer on religion, Karen Armstrong, produced a Genesis commentary in which she frequently wrestles with the text and advocates being able to disagree with the injustice of parts of it. Noah’s curse, “projecting his guilt and self-disgust onto an innocent party,” is one example (Armstrong 1996, 49). Theologian Adrian Thatcher similarly argues that readers should reject this passage and its unjust curse because responsible reading of the Bible requires one to discern which “savage texts” do not promote a healthy use of the Bible (Thatcher 2008, 41). In contrast, ethicist Robert Traer writes a devotional claiming one should reject only a literal interpretation of the passage. Recognizing the injustice of God’s flood, Noah’s curse, and the fact that God does not show up to correct the latter should lead readers to see that this story is an ironic allegory to teach that “the God of the Bible is not always God” (Traer 2010).

Infrequently, abolitionist interpreters would appeal to the injustice of Noah’s curse. Other strategies to debunk its weaponization were much more common (Haynes 2002, 181–84; Goldenberg 2017, 16–17, 148–49). One of the exceptional appeals to injustice comes from eighteenth-century Quaker, John Woolman, whose argument against slavery depends on readers recognizing that it is unjust for children “to be made Slaves, because their Parents sinned” (Woolman [1760] 1922, 354–55). The other interpreter, going by the pseudonym S. S. N., cuts deep with such refreshing sarcasm that I cannot help but quote him: he asks, “did Shem and Japheth [...] behave naughtily to their father, and did he curse, *not them*, but one of their children—and, if so, which one? [...] The event must have happened somehow, and by divine direction or countenance, for how otherwise could” the historical fact of Anglo-Saxon enslavement be explained? S. S. N. also has more straightforward comments on injustice: “Noah cursed *Canaan alone*, for what Ham had done. This was very doubtful justice, to say the least of it;—to discriminate thus unfairly between grand-sons [...] Noah] had no right, after a drunken carousal, to curse anything, except the wine that had fuddled him” (S. S. N. 1859, 248).

Surprisingly, an argument about the injustice of Noah’s curse could also serve thoroughly racist ends. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Charles Carroll denied that Noah’s curse could explain the origins of Africans experiencing slavery and degradation. In contrast to his contemporaries, he said it was absurd to “believe that a just, merciful, and loving God would approve the drunken desire of Noah to visit so dire a calamity upon Canaan, an unoffending individual; and would consent that it be perpetuated in his descendants throughout time” (Carroll 1900, 77). Having debunked Noah’s curse as the reason for the condition of Blacks, Carroll argued, instead, that Negroes are not human but humanoid beasts created on the sixth day. God’s

command for humans to rule over the animals (Gen 1:28), explains why White people (real humans) rule over Negroes (mere creatures).

Finally, there are cases where the story is told differently, and the injustice of Noah's curse plays a major role. Sometimes scholars studying the passage's historical weaponization conclude their research with a retelling of the story that reveals how the official version in the Bible is a weaponized fabrication (Haynes 2002, 215–18; Knust 2014, 408–9, 412–13; Swan 2003, 73–75). These are examples of what literary critics call symptomatic readings. In symptomatic readings, the meaning of a text is what is below the surface level; it is what the text hints at, hides, or represses (Best and Marcus 2009). According to these interpretations, the biblical text is unjust, which is why the story needs to be retold from the hidden or repressed perspective of the victim/s (Haynes 2002, 215). Other symptomatic readings by scholars have focused on how homophobia or heterosexism has led biblical authors to produce the biblical text as a surface that represses Noah's sexual fears and desires. What is repressed can be discerned by careful and creative reconstruction of Noah's unjust curse as a projection (Ide 1992, 45–51; Rashkow 2000).

More fulsome retellings have come in various forms. There is the book of Jubilees, a Jewish text from the second-century BCE, in which Ham's perception that the curse is unjust is one step in the author's subtle critique of their Greek oppressors (Klatt 1998, 66; Reed 2026; VanderKam 2018, 338–39). There is an obscure one-act play by the prolific Harlem Renaissance novelist Zora Neale Hurston in which Noah ironically curses his favorite son, Ham, and the entire family laments and recoils from the injustice of the malediction (Hurston [1927] 2008). There are two novels that, while mostly narrating events leading up to or during the flood, are packed with allusions to the main themes of Noah's curse—nakedness, drunkenness or alcoholism, favoritism with sibling rivalry, seeing or not seeing, cursing, slavery/subservience, etc. Each of them ends with an unambiguous critique of the unjust curse as the anticipated climax (Minot [1981] 1986; Provoost [2001] 2004). Shorter treatments come in a few short stories that paint Ham more sympathetically and Noah's curse as thoroughly unjust (Kuijer 2016, 47–73); in some cases, these short stories emphasize injustice even though the authors make the curse against Ham and, therefore, not off-target (Avery et al. 2014, 30–31; Barnes 1989, 17; Ostriker 1994, 43–44).²

Where Do We Go from Here?

The study of Genesis 9:18–29 can benefit from more serious engagement with interpreting Noah's curse of Canaan as an injustice. With few exceptions, academic writing on the passage does not cite exegetical or creative injustice interpretations. In 2026, a respected biblical scholar with a long track record of writing about Genesis published an article titled “Exonerating Ham,” which attempts to explore a new interpretation of the text. However, with no recognition of the presumption of Canaanite guilt, “exonerating Ham” ends up fitting into a familiar pattern. The author's conclusion: Ham was innocent, and Canaan was cursed because he deserved it (Alexander 2026). In 2023, a book critical of Noah's ark-building project and focusing on many retellings of his story never mentions any of the above literary interpretations of the curse as

² Alicia Suskin Ostriker has a footnote clarifying, “Noah's curse (Genesis 9:25) is actually only against Ham's son Canaan,” but the body of her story has Noah curse Ham with blackness and a future of his children's enslavement.

unjust.³ When they mention Noah's curse, they repeatedly summarize the biblical text by incorrectly suggesting the curse is against Ham (Cohen and Yates 2023, viii, 46, 133, 140, 154). These are just recent examples of a persistent problem. Until we can make arguments with awareness of the presumption of Canaanite guilt and in dialogue with interpretations that do not subscribe to it, we will continue to get the curse of Canaan wrong.

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³ The authors cite Julian Barnes's book, but not his explanation of the curse as unjust. They cite Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which can be interpreted as a commentary on the flood, but not her play where Hurston literally writes about Noah and Noah's family living in the aftermath of the flood.

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